



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

### Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

### About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>



Hw KCZH 4



4 2576.67.5,12



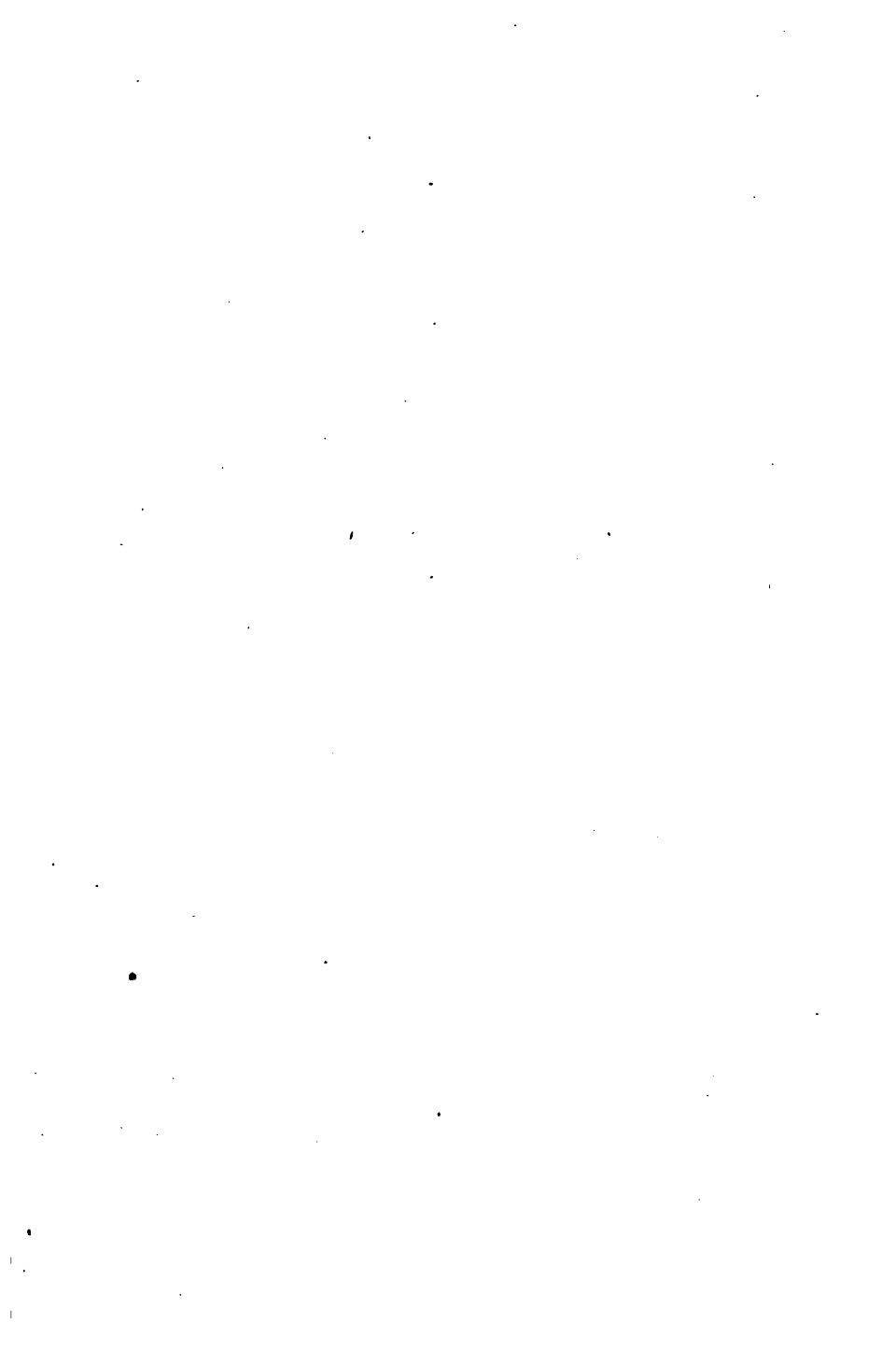
**Harvard College Library**

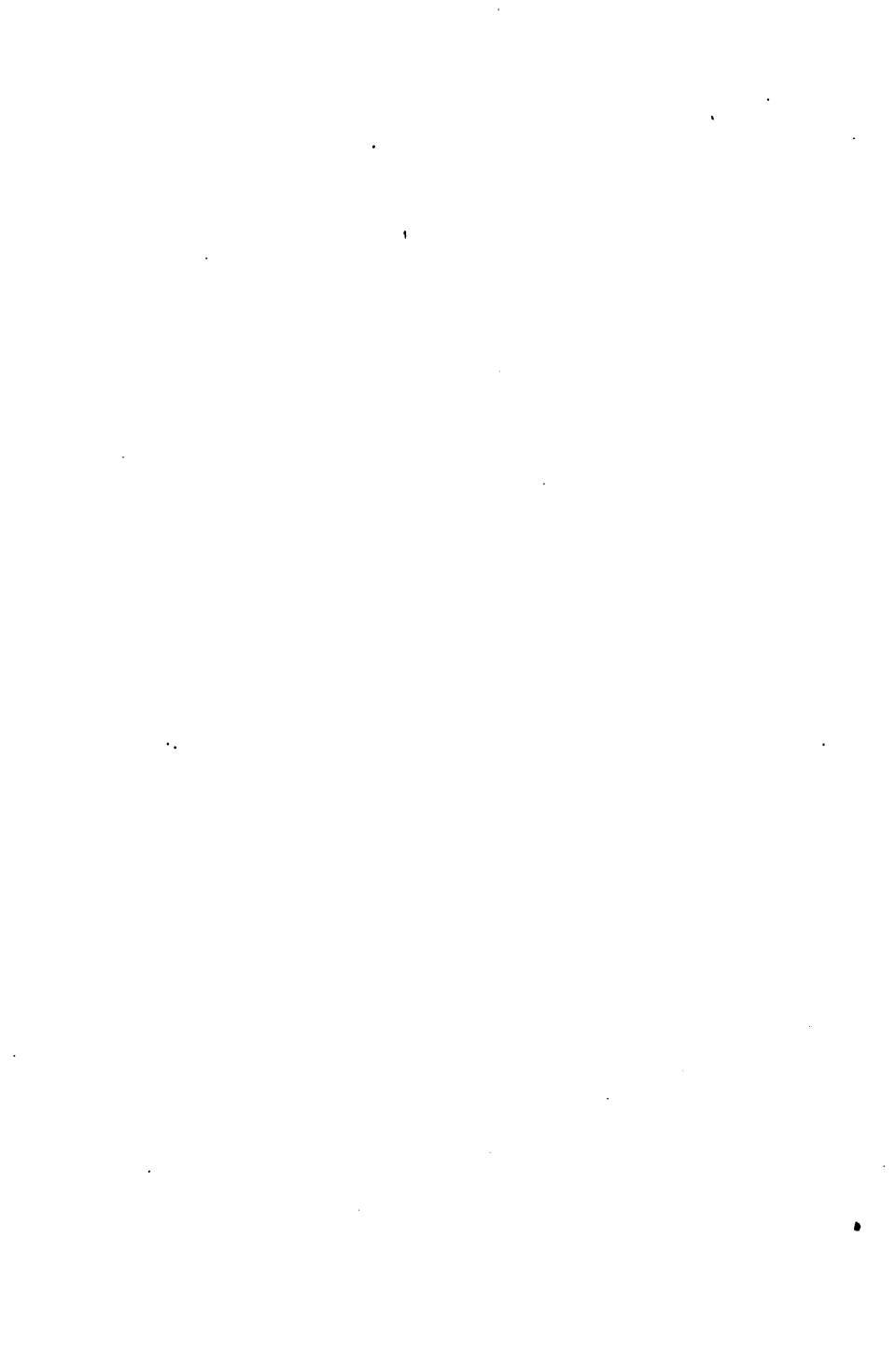
FROM

George O. Clark



125





**W**ORTHINGTON COMPANY call the  
attention of all who desire to own a more  
fully illustrated edition of this remarkable book  
to their new issue of

# FLIRT

## A STORY OF PARISIAN LIFE

BY

PAUL HERVIEU


ILLUSTRATED BY

MME. MADELEINE LEMAIRE

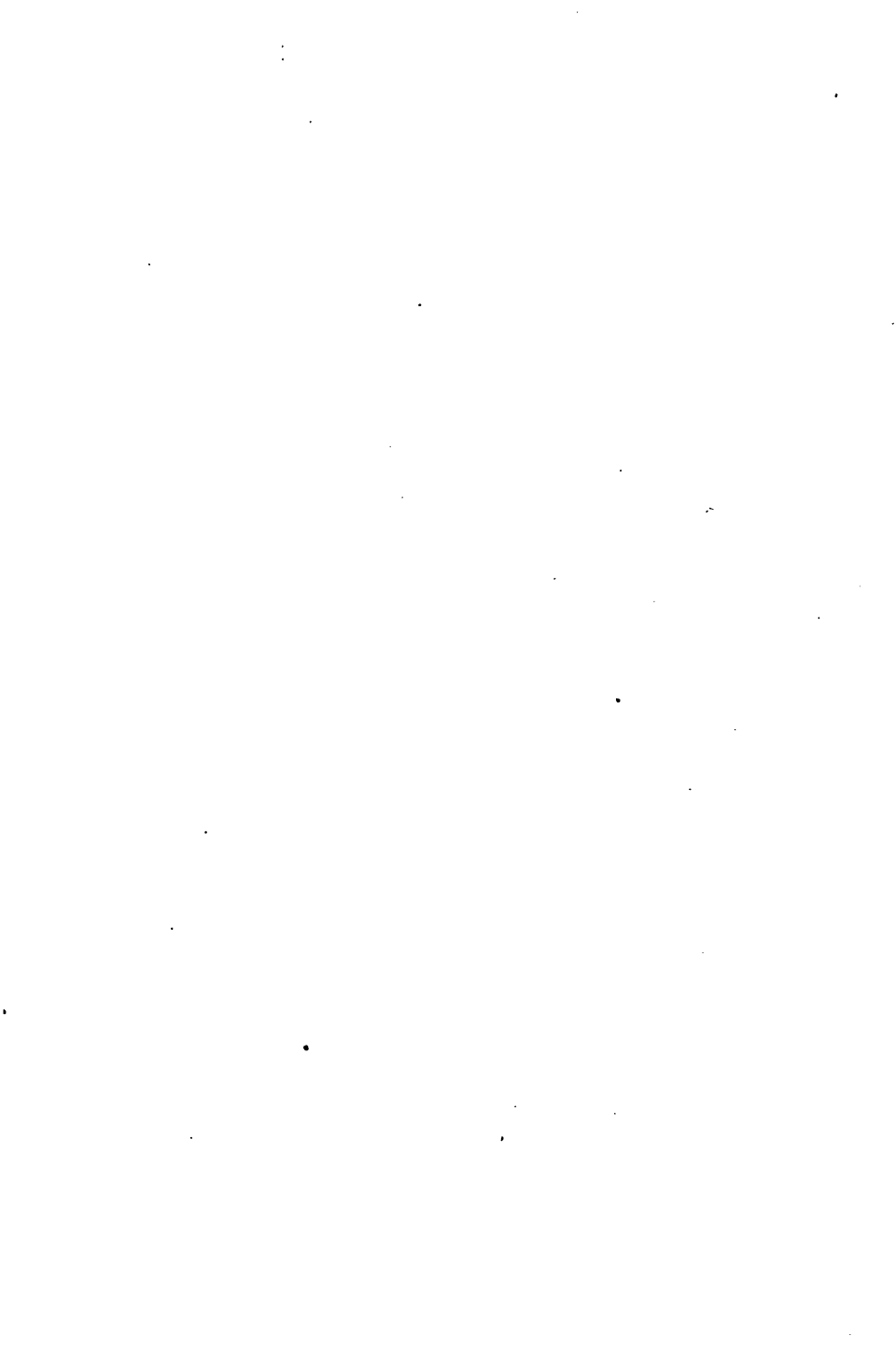
---

1 vol., 4to, cloth extra, \$6.00; in portfolio, \$5.00

---

 This book forms a delightful quarto, and is carefully printed by J. J. Little & Co., on specially prepared ivory-coated paper. It contains, besides the English translation of Mr. Hugh Craig, the magnificent thirty-seven photogravure plates after the original water-colors of Madeleine Lemaire: nineteen head and tail-pieces in colors, and eighteen full-page compositions in black and white. The latter are surrounded by a framework of flowers. These inimitable designs by one of the world's greatest artists, together with the exquisite portraits of the heroines, help to make up a book which is simply unique and surpasses anything done hitherto in book illustration.









PAUL HERVIEU

---

# FLIRT

A STORY OF PARISIAN LIFE

TRANSLATED BY HUGH CRAIG

*WITH THIRTY-SEVEN ILLUSTRATIONS*

BY

MME. MADELEINE LEMAIRE

ILLUSTRATOR OF THE ABBÉ CONSTANTIN, ETC., ETC.

NEW YORK  
WORTHINGTON COMPANY

747 BROADWAY

1890

42576.67.5.12  
✓



COPYRIGHT, 1890, BY  
HUGH CRAIG.

Press of J. J. Little & Co.  
Astor Place, New York.



# FLIRT

A STORY OF PARISIAN LIFE.

## I.

EVERY morning Madame Mésigny traversed twice, on foot, the whole length of the long avenue of the Bois. She had done this punctually since the first days of May, when the doctor, who had already reduced the *embonpoint* of Madame de Prébois, Madame Nully-Lévrier, and the Mesdemoiselles Balbenthal, had warned her that if she did not pay great, great attention, she would be *enormous* before she was thirty.

Clotilde took the doctor's advice seriously—that is, she observed just half of it. She was capable of submitting to painful trials, but not capable of renouncing the gratification of certain tastes; she was not able, therefore, to refrain, for more than a week, from pies and pastry, nice little soups, and cream in her tea; but, in revenge, she never failed to swallow, before every meal, some white powders, that became black in dilution; of these, to balance matters, she took double doses, which

created the tortures of Purgatory in her stomach, while her pearly nostrils palpitated like the wings of a dying butterfly.

This pretty trifle hitherto had not always succeeded by noon-time in slipping on the second sleeve of one of those jonquil or rose dressing-gowns, through which living gleams of marble radiate here and there; she had passed her time in half rising, in half lying down again, in reading in an easy-chair, in suggesting to herself the duty of looking over her household accounts, or the necessity of writing something, just to put off the instant when her maid would come to brush her hair or lace her stays. Now, however, every day at a quarter to eleven she was dressed, ready (which in the case of a woman is an event long subsequent to that of being dressed; why, the most astute have never been able to discover), in fact, a little before eleven she was more than ready, had gone out, was on the road, at work.

As Madame Mésigny regarded her walk as a sporting affair rather than one of the commonest acts in the world, she adopted for her morning toilet a kind of hunting costume; and thus dressed, she descended all alone the monumental staircase at the corner of the Rue de Presbourg, that led from the rather cramped suite of rooms, in which her husband was not yet quite awake, and where, four years before, a rather pale honeymoon had begun, whose last quarter at present shed on the household only rare gleams, fugitive and cold.

In a maroon-colored straw hat, almost masculine and almost Tyrolean in form, with a maroon feather, a maroon veil, a skirt and jacket of light maroon cloth relieved only by a waistcoat of drill, her ankles clasped in untanned leather gaiters, the toes pointed and varnished, Clotilde traversed briskly the Avenue Kleber and the Avenue Eylau, and when, with the plump vivacity of a woman too full of youthful energy not to master her *embonpoint*, she reached the avenue of the Bois de Boulogne at the very time and at the very spot where the early spring promenaders were lounging, she slackened her speed to measure the wide and splendid foot-path, which is bordered on the right by a brilliant throng of carriages and on the left by a slope of grass, well watered, freshly mown, and smooth.

At this part of her walk Clotilde always was careful to observe in her gait the speed befitting a personage, unimpeachable, admired but respected, and who had to appear unoccupied, yet in pursuit of health, attractive and a lady.

She met, in fact, a numerous crowd of ladies and gentlemen in morning dress, to whose features, however, she could give no name. For the most part they were representatives of the foreign colony that resides in the quarter of the Arc de l'Étoile, a cosmopolite world circulating in constellations, where, at times, the features of both sexes had tints that in French faces would have been jaundice, but in them expressed health; where, at



times, the voices had the sounds of oaths whistled through the teeth, and tones that might have been addressed to a Hindoo, which formed the remarks of venerable gentlemen to little misses with streaming hair. At every crossing there was a gay and brilliant group of this society that enjoys a perpetual holiday, and lives at Paris as in a watering-place, without care, without occupation, without any relation with the natives.

Then, here and there, were turfmen, their hands behind their backs, which they turned on simple foot-passengers, who sympathetically faced in the sunlight the space reserved for all that trots, steps, paces, kicks, prances and gallops.

Then Clotilde would meet or pass a certain number of native Parisians, fashionable-looking, followed or not by their carriages; friends in pairs, or spouses in couples, solitary or flirting, and interrupted here and there by rows of three, four, or five of those young fellows, posing arm in arm, whom one meets everywhere and who never seem to be at college.

Clotilde, with her punctual habits and business-like air, could not fail to puzzle the throng of promenaders by whom she was now known by sight, as people know each other at the end of the week on the terrace of Dieppe or the esplanade of Interlaken. And from the admiring fashion in which the men looked at her, not one of them seemed to wish that, whatever the doctor might say, any particle of that beautiful form, the per-





fect charm of which regaled their eyes, should evaporate.

Clotilde, indeed, presented a type of extreme and attractive originality. Her hair in its silky abundance was very black, while her cheek had a clear tint, and quickly flushed by exercise. The chin was rather prominent; the mouth, very small, with a facile smile—one of those simple smiles, with dimples, which seem in the case of certain women to be the remains of a spoiled and pampered childhood—displayed teeth, oh, so white, rather short, rather broad, the exact medium. The fine nose, almost imperceptibly *retroussé* at the point, scarcely separated, under a brow perhaps too low; her eyes of black diamonds brilliant and large, like those exceptional gems which it seems folly to display unless they are worn by actresses or queens and which blend an air of embarrassment with the radiant pride of being adorned with them. No! Reality never possessed a duplicate of those pupils; only imaginative painting, in its tracing of eyes and of *chic*, could furnish models for comparison, as, for example, in those lovely polychrome posters that invite the public to visit a show, a charity bazaar, a millinery shop, to read a novel, or not to travel without such or such an object, or—well, the head of woman, conceived as symbolizing the spirit of drama or of literature, as evoking the image of beneficence, of happy elegance, of perfect tourism, has generally beyond its variable adornments a magnificence of visual rays

which ought to give the best description of what we mean. Or perhaps Madame Mésigny made one think of those splendid dolls that have a fresh color in their round cheeks, a nose so small that it seems to exist only to let one say there is one, and eyes of good china, opened like saucers and filled with a look of astonishment which they make you share.

For the rest there was all this mixture of involuntary expressions in the modest glances which Clotilde sent, right and left, on the passers-by, while advancing with her healthy, bewitching step. There was a confused blending in her of taste for the good, of unthinking temptation toward adventure, of satisfaction with her dressmaker, and, as it were, a perpetual rapture in contemplating the world through the vast bays whence her looks bent down.

So more than one observer among the experienced men who, by glancing between their eyelids at a woman in the street, please themselves in deciding at once whether she pleases them, and if there is anything to be done with her—more than one of these observers turned round, irritated and perplexed, after Madame Mésigny had passed.

Her air and carriage had in fact heterogeneities which the honor of a conversation would only have brought out more strongly. Old Madame Sorlin, mother of Madame de Prébois, in whose salon Clotilde enjoyed the favored position accorded to all new recruits—one of those persons to whom age

imparts the look of old eunuchs, and perhaps their sentiments toward young women—loved to repeat : “ Madame Mésigny ! why, I find her charming ! I begin by declaring I find her charming ! But after a little talk with her, I am always asking myself whether she was brought up in the Conservatoire or in the Convent of English Ladies.”

The truth was that Clotilde had received a home training alternately with her father and mother, who, separate while living, and dying apart on their several travels, were now reunited in the same tomb, on which their daughter, observing the dates with pious regularity, used to place a beautiful bouquet of roses which served for both. Formed, turn and turn about, by her father, an engineer, a man of business, decorated for his philanthropy, and by a mother whom the premature marriage of a very young lover had turned to religion, Clotilde had received a twofold preparation for life, and the elements had never fused together. She had acquired two modes of life, two second natures which struggled with each other, and thus, rendered unstable in all that was not an act of pure instinct, she could only achieve projects suddenly springing up in her brain ; when she deliberated, irresolution fixed her attitude. In this disposition of mind, Clotilde would have perhaps assumed the veil of the White Sisters, whose costume she admired, when her mother, dying of the rupture of an aneurism, fell into her arms on leaving the basilica of Saint Peter. Her father, warned

by telegraph of the accident which made him a widower, hastened to Rome, pretended to shed a few tears with his pretty daughter of twenty who had been left alone for eight days with a chambermaid and a coffin, and then, having brought them all to Paris, he without delay set to work to marry off his only child.

Just under his hand, that was always ready to sign a contract, he found Albert Mésigny, the son of one of his innumerable associates, a young man of sound health, always well dressed, playing only in good clubs, protected by a judicious guardian who was always trustworthy and disgusted with clandestine liaisons. Albert was inflammable enough to marry a girl with a fortune that corresponded to that destined to himself, merely to possess her, if her freshness and figure attracted him. At the first interview he showed himself prompt, attentive, sensible, easy to get on with, and was at once accepted. The two fathers each put two hundred thousand francs into the business, which they were in a hurry to complete in order to go into another; and then the papa of the bride went to cut through a tongue of land, unwholesome enough to give him a fever of which he died, leaving, with a very fair fortune, a name which his daughter could lose without regret, but for which she was not rich enough to find a very brilliant substitute.

The young couple had at first tasted the easy joy of a new, bright home in which love consisted only in each letting the other do what he or she

pleased. The thought of marriage had never presented itself to Albert except under the symbol of a bed for two, into which there was no means of drawing your chosen companion till you had convinced her by a sacrament ; he considered the eternal union of married people as the most practical fashion, in all respects, of the gratification of the senses. As for Madame Mésigny, long before and constantly after, marriage appeared to her as the allegory of a Clotilde emancipated from family tutelage, paying only agreeable visits and receiving no others ; of a Clotilde chattering at home and deciding at her milliner's, just as the fancy struck her, with the prerogative of possessing, in everything, the habits and opinions she preferred, and plenty of time to change them. In these circumstances the zeal with which Albert passionately set out was soon lost in attentions which, in spite of him, remained egoistic, through association with an exquisite and complaisant woman whose ingenuous nature did not appear always susceptible of emotional progress. In brief, the time had arrived with the Mésignys when the couple, without becoming hostile or even unhappy, ceased to be a couple merely for forming a household, when they did not embrace merely for the sake of embracing ; when the roseate bond which bound them took a faded tint, like little barometric threads, without any one being able to perceive why, because the ambient air peoples itself with the invisible, with mysterious and all-mighty atoms. So



one and the other began again to know and enjoy, in a certain measure, the free sweetness of their old slumbers, when Clotilde had accustomed herself to rise early and when Albert, if he had not been able to discharge his duty as conjugal escort to theatre or party, gave to baccarat a part of his nights. Next morning when, lazy and his eyelids blinking and rumped, he saw his wife powder her nose in a ray of light which entered by the door of the dressing-room, he would mutter, in the midst of a yawn, one of those empty questions that require no answer, and to which the person addressed may keep silence without failing in courtesy. "What, you are there? Are you up already? Is it the same thing every day, then? You think, then, it will you do good?"

Every day, Clotilde had not been a quarter of an hour in the Avenue of the Bois de Boulogne, before she saw at a distance, coming toward her, a handsome man of about thirty-five, a knight of the Legion of Honor, wearing a full beard which was black, magnificent, scented and curled, with his elbows turned out, his hands easily gloved in dogskin, and swinging his cane with a stiff, careless movement as if it were a little scythe, to cut into little, little pieces all those who did not know that this beard belonged to Monsieur Dieudonné des Frasses.

He always affected not to see Madame Mésigny till he was within three or four paces of her. She,

likewise, did not raise her head till the precise moment of this proximity.

"O Monsieur des Frasses!" she then cried with a look of enchanted politeness, as she held out her plump hand.

"My dear madame, I must be having a run of luck where you are concerned"—was the usual remark of Des Frasses, who had been assiduously at that spot since Clotilde, at Madame Hobbinson's, had declared, quite without further intentions, that henceforth she would be there every morning, whatever might be the weather.

Or else he replied by some equally commonplace compliment, and then, seized with a certain embarrassment which rendered all his gestures awkward for a minute, he could not resolve to put on his hat except after a long series of "Put on your hat, I beg. Do put on your hat."

By a tacit agreement, in which their good faith was shown by their perfect complicity, it was merely a piece of good fortune constantly happening that brought them together. They even found in it a subject to support the embarrassed dialogue of their opening phrases.

"Yes," said Madame Mésigny, "it is so charming here, so full of movement, I think I must have been dull not to have learned sooner the perfume of the morning at Paris; so you see I am making up for lost time. But you too, sir, are faithful to the Bois."

"Madame," Des Frasses would ask with anxious

expression, "you will not be annoyed if I ask permission to accompany you? Shall I not be indiscreet?"

"No—oh, no!" she replied with her unaffected smile, and with that look of honest encouragement and those little shakes of the head and the shoulders which ought to characterize expansive little angels when some suitable and very timid person comes to the threshold of Paradise.

At first Clotilde had regarded the contingency of this *tête-à-tête* without thinking of the spectators or imagining that it could injure her reputation. Soon, however, she bethought herself of possible inconvenience, but the impossibility of her taking a resolution kept her subject to the course of events in which, besides, she found pleasure. And now, when she found again the society of this punctual promenader, she only experienced, as she walked by his side, an agreeable pang, a taste on the tongue of a *pâté* too highly seasoned, and even, at times, a crazy longing that some passing acquaintance should see her in this situation, of which, however, she never boasted to any one, though she would have loved to be teased for her coquettishness, and to have justified herself haughtily.

It would, in fact, have been a grave mistake to attribute to Madame Albert Mésigny the idea that Des Frasses could ever become her lover. The notion that a stranger should touch even her brow, even with the mere tip of a finger, never entered

into her mind and would have made all the pride of her flesh shudder. Still more, if she had imagined that her companion was capable of such a thought, she would have fled with disgust, with all the ermine's love of spotlessness, with that instinctive and bitter wrath which makes pussy in repose spit at the impudence of prowling Toms. Much of her boldness in talking familiarly with men came simply from a modesty which, after four years of marriage, preserved in her still the trouble and charm of blushing even at conjugal endearments. Material expressions of love seemed to her a kind of vicious passion, reserved, like smoking, for the ruder sex, and which a sensible wife would tolerate in a husband. The feeling of this comparison was even so clear, in Clotilde's mind, that no one could, in her presence, make allusion to the vagaries of very distinguished ladies without her seeing in them scenes of very bad taste, nor without recalling the miserable creatures vaguely seen in a blue fog through the windows of cafés where they were smoking cigarettes.

To crown all, Des Frasses, even if his handsome framework was inwardly cracking beneath the weight of unavowed desires, was not capable of nourishing any hope. He was, in regard to Clotilde, in the second phase of his normal state with regard to the women about whom he busied himself; a phase without conceivable issue, without advance or retreat, into which he regularly fell almost at the beginning of the passion into which

he tumbled every year or often twice a year. The first period for this sensitive soul opened with his forming some drawing-room acquaintance with an attractive, amiable, and pretty woman; then, transported by his dream, Des Frasses immediately saw himself landed in the very heart of Love's own land, before he had even set out. Overlooking all that make the cares of the voyage, he began by thinking of how he should rule his life when he had arrived at his destination. All his plans, then, were those of a man at once tender and firm, refined, superior, perfect, and sublime, and all that was needful to give this fiction a definite form was for its heroine to contribute the reality of her consent. It was about how to obtain this reality that Des Frasses began to be embarrassed. To speak the truth, he did not believe in the virtue of women except while they were enamoured of their husbands or their lovers, and he knew how to acquit himself skilfully in the necessary investigation of this point. He was no dupe of the comedy that society plays, and no one better than this amateur of the tittle-tattle of gallantry could have extracted encouragement from the knowledge or the suspicion of the many intrigues that surrounded him and which necessarily had started and were starting from the exact level he occupied. But from impotence in putting into practice the lessons of his general experience, from incapacity in distinguishing, when they were produced before him, the constant phenomena which were so visi-

ble when he looked askance at others, Des Frasses lost his road, and persuaded himself that his evil fortune had led him to an object which was not like the rest. Thus, like most of his kind, he had a tendency to treat as exceptional what was personal to himself, leaving the rest of the world to move on by common rules. In the magnifying glass which each uses to examine his proper interests, he took feminine airs of negligence for disdain, the first swerve for a regular bolt, and despaired of his task at the precise moment when, perchance, he was about to discover an assent in an inattention, a promise in a subterfuge. Thus the heart of Des Frasses languishing did lie, and became a sort of chrysalis, where an amorous life contrived to vegetate and which could last forever if there were not always in the world a new growth of womankind, attractive, amiable, and pretty.

"Ah! ah!" Clotilde exclaimed gayly, while the stride of her companion regulated itself by hers. "I walk a little too fast for you, do I not? You see, I am not always a good one to follow——"

"Not at all, madame, quite the contrary. I admire your pace. Your step is ravishing—it is not a man's, nor is it a woman's; it is your own, quite original."

During these walks together their conversation might have been listened to by Clotilde's departed mamma, by her husband, and almost by all the world without anybody finding anything to blame therein. They themselves scarcely ever felt, be-

tween their words, behind their looks, or in their pauses of silence, anything indeterminate and reciprocal.

Often Des Frasses would talk of literature, of painting, of the theatre, with the authority of a speaker who knew well enough that in a certain number of houses he was regarded as one of the three or four men of talent who regularly met there. Sometimes, too, by a dash into politics he stirred in the brain of Madame Mésigny the very verge of great thoughts, as he recalled the time of his being *sous préfet*, a short time indeed, but which it was felt ought to have been remarkable, and when he spoke of May 16, as if this date would in later days occupy history as much as the Hundred Days. Or he would allude to the events of his aristocratic infancy in the château of Savoy where he was born; he reckoned up the honors to which his rank as noble would at present have raised him, if he had preserved his Italian nationality, as most of his people had done. Then he looked at Clotilde and drew a deep breath rather than sighed, as if the air of the landscape was full of compensations. But these questions of art or politics, this Savoy business, and a thousand other things and all else, recited in a melancholy, drawling voice, seemed to appear only in a cloud under which Des Frasses hid the sun of his sentiments.

Madame Mésigny was not always attentive to these discourses, and in her replies it happened also that she only listened to herself, only spoke

for the public she met or passed, by uttering in a louder tone a phrase which announced a marvellous intimacy with *chic* details in the light of which it pleased her to appear for the moment to the unknown throng. Nevertheless, she felt the sweet thrills of a cerebral pleasure in cherishing the idea that by permitting the assiduities of Des Frasses she was walking blamelessly under the confused shadow of something wrong, and in fancying that undefined desires that never penetrated her were floating around her, amid her hygiene and newly assumed habits.

Frequently the appearance of a third party doubled the density of this ideal atmosphere. This was when Monsieur Trept, from the other side of the avenue, recognized the quick-walking couple, cantered over from the riding-path to present his respects to Madame Mésigny, and shook hands with Des Frasses.

Clotilde used to stop at once, delighted at being so surprised. She did the "present arms" with her parasol or held it, closed, behind her back *en bandoulière*, and was enchanted with prolonging one of those attitudes in which it is rather unusual and very *high life* to display one's self, such as to be on foot, talking with a gentleman on horseback.

Besides Trept, by the same right as Des Frasses, was in Clotilde's circle a friend of her own, with whom, as with the other, she liked to gossip, to dance, to play drawing-room comedy. It was with utter indifference that Albert Mésigny shook the



hands of these cronies, with whom he never had any conversation but when he gave them news of his wife.

As he approached, Trept never failed to make, good-naturedly, some such observation as "Well, well, I meet you here again!" Or perhaps, "I would not like to disturb—" Whereupon Des Frasses, in spite of his intimacy with Trept, affected the grave and stolid air of a man who would prefer to be impaled rather than compromise a lady. Clotilde would burst into laughter and say:

"Oh, I should have liked you to have heard our conversation for the last half-hour. Monsieur des Frasses was explaining to me how he was going to demand his naturalization papers at Rome and become an Italian."

The eyes of Des Frasses at once expressed reproach, and braving what he appeared to dread more than the stake, he could not let pass without protest such an unfair thrust, as if he mistrusted that the lady of his hopes might take her own joke seriously by and by.

"You do not add, madame, that the first condition I made at the Quirinal was to be sent at once to Paris as secretary of embassy."

Although Trept on all occasions paid court boldly to Clotilde, he did not seem to notice the fervent tone which always accompanies corrections of this kind. Besides, the impatience of his horse was generally ready to divert attention.

While the rider and his mount were in difficul-





ties, Clotilde could not help observing how well Trept's figure looked in his London clothes and how handsome he was with his reddish-brown mustache, curled upward to show his sensitive lips, quivering with nervous contractions, through which gleamed fine wolf-like teeth. The coquettish disposition of Madame Mésigny instinctively looked for the amorous expression which she usually met in those gray-blue eyes fixed for the moment on the neck of a restive animal, and shot through with little golden undulations, the only sign of effort in the whole man.

To speak the truth, Clotilde would have lost her trouble if she had taken any. Trept did not like to make love except in places that seemed to him devoted to the purpose, and when his operations on the exchange were over, in the evening by preference, and seated with a possibility of pronouncing clearly his words and having a chance to be heard. In the world of society—in which he cultivated the women through prudence and good form, and at times to insinuate himself behind them into new salons, as well as to get from their husbands invitations to a hunt or a little business—Trept sowed the flowers of compliment with a generous and confident hand, leaving them alone for a time, according to their species, before going to see if they were sprouting, and cultivating all with the requisite degree of warmth. His sharp sense of what was useful and allowable in flirtation kept him aloof from other intrigues. So when, with a

final rear of his chestnut, he took leave of Madame Mésigny, she remained for a moment vexed and thoughtful at having seen, so calm, so little jealous, so politely indifferent, the very man whose audacities of speech, sympathetic and amusing as they were, she had recently had occasion, and was sure she would soon have occasion again, to repress. Leaving a slight touch of sulkiness which had seized Des Frasses at being disturbed to pass off, she looked after Trept going away, like an enigma, disappearing toward the Arc de Triomphe, and returning to his business, of which nobody knew anything except that it allowed him all comforts, and about which nobody had ever the thought of asking him questions, so easy was he in his manner, so grave and solvent and such good company.

Clotilde, to speak more precisely, did not take into account, in the case of either of her two *cavalieri servienti*, what constitutes the social physiognomy of a man and the *ensemble* of his *rôle* in life. When their names, pronounced by a third party, fell on her ear, they awakened in her only recollections of flirtations, hopes of flirtations, a longing that they were there to flirt with on the spot. In the depths of Clotilde's reveries, Des Frasses was not a gentleman of Savoy, cultivating poetry after losing office; Trept was not a broker of unknown origin, of notorious success, and a man of whom no one knew whether he was thirty-five or forty-five years old; as far as she was concerned one might have been the other, so closely were their

individualities blended for her in the fact that one and other were men who had paid court to her at the Balbenthals' yesterday, and who would do so to-morrow at Madame de Prébois's.

Altogether they were recognized clients in her business—a business of idling, where no serious transactions took place, where nothing was bought or sold. They were the persons whom she pretended not to see at first when she arrived anywhere, or when they entered, and for whom a permanent “good-day,” quite superfluous to utter, reigned in her heart; they were the men to whom at parting she mechanically said “good-by,” repeating, if needful, that “good-by” if any belated guests interposed, as if to preserve in her little hands the particular impression of their hands, which to all appearance were as empty as those of the others, but which still held for her—something.

Once when she had traversed the avenue of the Bois backward and forward, Madame Mésigny promised to sit down with Des Frasses at the Rondpoint des Pannés, provided it was not yet mid-day. Generally she could not sit on a chair without finding the place too draughty for people in perspiration, and therefore always returned home immediately after ending her regular walk, whether it were mid-day or no. But this matter of consulting a watch had, nevertheless, during the whole walk made a kind of secret convention between the two companions, from which the one

might cherish the ambition of a result, while the other enjoyed the prospect of having to grant a concession, and in those moments when one knows not what to say, they discussed with delight the question whether, looking at the speed of the hands, they would arrive before or behind time at the rendezvous of their two imaginations.

Des Frasses escorted the lady to the corner of the Avenue Eylau, not further, by a sentiment of propriety which was understood and approved, and without explanations which might contain some dangerous or painful point of view. They parted, indeed, as is usual for persons who have done nothing wrong and who are free to quit each other whenever it may seem to them best to do so.

Then Clotilde, resuming her active step, her step of grand parades, arrived at home just in time to strip off her morning dress, appear *en déshabillé*, and recover her breath before breakfast.

During these proceedings Mésigny ordinarily entered his wife's boudoir, who, all earnest, all warm still with a wholesome excitement, cried out, to anticipate inappropriate questions and direct her husband's curiosity in the channels she wished :

"See, I am still gaining on my corset! Look here!"

Albert, still heavy with a remnant of sleep, sometimes said yes, sometimes no, and most often added :

"I tell you I am dying of hunger."

"Well, I'm ready. Just feel here—no, not

there, stupid—here, on my back. Oh, how absurd you are!”

Clotilde then went to her place at the table, a little out of humor that the awkwardness of her husband now made her doubt whether she had or had not profited by the doctor's treatment, and inwardly reproaching Albert for not feeling more interest in all the trouble she was taking, just as if she were training herself down solely for him, for his special pleasure, for his own *fête* day.







## II.

"OH, how charming it is here!" exclaimed Agnes Hobbison, quite out of breath with the down-hill run to which Roland de Prébois had wickedly dared her. "Is that the Bois de Boulogne down there below us?" the girl asked, extending her index finger to the centre of the panorama which the sinking sun was gilding, beneath the terraces that, stage on stage, rose, at the villa of the Prébois, along the hill of Saint-Germain.

"No, that is Vesinet," replied her young comrade, who like her was about seventeen years old, with the beardless, pensive face of a growing youth, long, silky chestnut hair, a delicate figure graceful to feebleness, and the lofty brow of a Chatterton whom success at lawn-tennis or leading the german had reconciled to existence.

"And that," resumed Agnes, "is the Seine?"

Roland laughed, and drawing up a little the corner of his fresh lips, with the air of authority that is fitting to scold gently a favorite scholar—

"What would you have it to be?"

"I do not know," she replied quietly, as she let

fall her slender arm, enveloped in a loose sleeve very large at the elbow and tight toward the wrist.

She stood, with the serious air that a young girl can assume, erect in her simple white dress, in her white gathered-in corsage which brought out her figure in high relief. Her bronze shoes planted their narrow heels in the thick red sand of a walk winding through the slopes of a meadow, where the flowers, artificially wild, bore at the end of long sprays their spaced and chosen colors, and in the depths of a hat of drill covered with ruches, in the gleam of a white shade which was reflected on a large knot of muslin strings, appeared the darling little blond face of Agnes, with its regular lines all powdered with freckles on the rosy lustre of her complexion.

At length she turned toward the higher terraces whence her companion and she had descended so quickly, and in the familiar tone of a girl who lives on a footing of fraternity with a mother not very rigorous in the choice of proper phrases—

“Mamma would be awfully broken up in getting here.”

Roland looked at her with a sly air. He had a smile that was not without archness, for the flirter who is making his *début* always shows some remaining traces of the teasing child.

“Don’t be afraid,” he whispered; “Madame Hobbinson will not overtake us; she will not have her palpitations. I saw that she went and sat

down in the kiosque like the admiral and grandmother."

Little Agnes turned as red as the poppy she stooped to pluck.

"Then she will scold me!"

"Scold you? Why?"

"Because I am alone with you. Mamma, of course, said she didn't see anything wrong in that, but that it might make a bad effect upon the world."

Roland made an indignant gesture.

"Well," said he, "if you begin already to bother yourself about the world——"

To raise herself above this sovereign disdain, Agnes shrugged her shoulders several times, and behind them by this delicate movement she sent the world, the whole grindstone of the world, a-rolling over the field. At the same time she asked:

"Whom have you at dinner?"

"Madame Nully-Lévrier, if she hasn't yet gone to La Branchette. There is Jonzac, if he has come back from Rouen. You know that his opera has just had a great success there."

"I don't care. So much the worse! I hate him!"

"So do I. Father, mother, and grandmother hate him too. Mother simply says that Jonzac amuses her with his pifferaro head, and father says that he is a superior man. I suppose that's the reason why he's invited."

"Why does he not ever bring his wife since he is married?"

"Mother believes that it is because Madame Jonzac has no dresses, and besides, they don't care about his bringing her. If by chance his wife is there, everything is changed. He scarcely speaks; he is a regular bore."

"Mamma has forbidden me to speak with him alone."

"Indeed!" said Roland, rather piqued; "just as in my case."

And as if to project with sharpness his looks into the vague distance, he half-closed his eyes with an air which, given to him almost necessarily by his shortness of sight, was just weak enough to lend to his face a charming expression and which he assumed when he felt disposed to cajole or perplex or was annoyed.

Agnes felt the reproach. She looked affectionately at the young man and said in a resolute tone:

"It is not the same thing."

She would without doubt have been very much embarrassed if her companion had at once begged her to be kind enough to explain the difference which she drew between the two prohibitory edicts of her mother, although this difference was very clearly felt in her unconscious instincts. By the side of Roland, Agnes felt a certain security, just as with the good dog whose attachment and gentleness she had learned to appreciate. Near

Jonzac, as in the case of most other men, the dangers which natural prudence made her confusedly dread troubled her with the same slight anxiety which was born in her, if a strange dog that might perhaps be inclined to bite rubbed against her dress as she passed.

Roland continued :

"We shall have, too, Monsieur and Madame Mésigny, Monsieur Trept——"

"And Monsieur des Frasses——"

A low laugh came out from between the lips of the young man, while the girl closed hers in a modest, sly fashion, with all the pride in her bosom of having uttered a naughty phrase, so favorably received.

"Ah," said Roland, "you don't love Madame Mésigny any more?"

"Oh, don't think that, I beg of you. To begin with, I think she dresses very nicely ; she is always very polite, very kind to me."

"To you only !"

"Well, isn't it strange she can't stir a step without having Monsieur Trept and Monsieur des Frasses at her heels?"

A strong emotion imperceptibly agitated Roland's whole being at noticing with what calm hardihood the young girl expressed opinions on a phenomenon quite common to see, it must be said, but which cannot be discussed without opening a path to dangerous fancies. He felt stung with an affectionate yet culpable curiosity ; a tender and

timorous desire urged him to seek to discover by devious means what the girl knew about life, and if perhaps she knew as much as he did.

"This Mésigny," he said, "is all the same a blockhead."

Agnes opened wide her eyes, which were filled with limpid blue. Evidently before these words of Roland, she had never paid heed to the existence of the husband, whose social *rôle* was annihilated in the insignificance of the individual.

"In his place," he continued, "I would begin by smashing the faces of those two gentlemen."

The young girl in silence and increasing wonder looked at her friend, and was touched at heart and proud of his courageous tone and of the air of decision that made his countenance look more manly.

"Yes," she replied, at last, "one often meets women who are quite beyond understanding."

In her timid ideas, which she had not succeeded in formulating, Agnes nevertheless dared to censure those who permitted many persons to pay them attention at the same time. This plurality seemed to her inexplicable, something monstrous and impossible, as if, for instance, she herself had even suddenly taken it into her head to engage herself to Maurice Balbenthal for three successive dances. And in that case she had a sudden vision of Roland smashing Maurice Balbenthal's face.

At this instant the gossip of the young people was interrupted.

"Hello! hello! Agnes! Roland! Where are

you ?" cried Madame Hobbinson and Madame de Prébois, from the top of one of the terraces, half way between the platform of the château and the bottom of the park.

The first was making signals with her pocket-handkerchief streaming like a flag ; the second was waving impatiently, like a staff of a color, her long cane, which ended in a handle of Dresden china, and no one could perhaps have divined, simply by the aid of common-sense, which of the two mothers was most anxious.

"Children, I begin to see, are still more insupportable when they grow up than when they were little," observed Madame de Prébois, looking at the landscape with her hand across her face, its plane just touching the point of intersection that separated two widely different expressions.

She had indeed the custom of blackening her eyebrows, the circle of her eyes, her eyelashes, and the gray locks that were appearing in her hair, and thus she seemed to wear in the upper region of her head a perpetual mourning for the first-born that she had lost, while the lower part of her face, with its rounded cheeks and radiant hue, seemed from day to day to develop under the increasing force of the kisses which her big boy, whom she loved and who had been left her, impressed upon it.

Madame Hobbinson exclaimed :

"Here they are, madame ! here they are ! Hello down there ! You needn't take the trouble of running. You'll make yourselves too hot."

Her first care, when the two stragglers came up, was to put straight her daughter's large hat, which was rather awry, with that calm smile in her looks and on her lips by which Agnes was never assured that her mother did not have some severe thoughts in her heart; for on entering the house Madame Hobbinson at times gave full course to all the scolding that had been accumulating within her, and at other times, as a result of identical circumstances, she preserved the expression of amiability which she assumed for the edification of the world. It was from manners like these that Agnes had to learn her principles of conduct.

Madame Hobbinson was a little taller than her daughter, which made her appear almost as slender. Like the latter, she had a mass of blond hair, blue eyes, a thin, straight nose, a little mouth, a very little chin, but these traits were still so delicately defined that there remained in them an equal youth, so to speak. To look at Madame Hobbinson was to see Agnes without freckles; to hear Agnes was to hear her mother's voice without an American accent.

"All the guests arrived?" asked Roland.

"Not yet. I've a letter from Madame Nully-Lévrier, who will not come, and Des Frasses has telegraphed to me not to expect him at dinner. He will try to pay me this evening a little visit of apology. The poor fellow is indeed very ceremonious. He's too polite; he spoils me!"

While Roland and Agnes exchanged a look of



intelligence, Madame Hobbinson sought the eyes of Madame de Prébois to find if she could read there the true spirit of these last words, but the lady of the house showed herself quite serious and not at all ironical. Besides, if she did not conceal from herself the force which drew Des Frasses to her, she still had enough to satisfy her, for she loved flirtations under her roof and promoted them by always inviting together people who made a pair in this kind of ornamental work. It was in a certain way to be faithful to her, to herself, never to abandon a love affair of which her initiative had been the silent, constant, undemonstrable, and disinterested intermediary.

So, as soon as the train had discharged its passengers at dinner-time, Monsieur and Madame Mésigny, Trept and Jonzac, she took care to communicate the contents of the despatch received from Des Frasses, as she had, as it were, a scrupulous desire to exculpate herself to Clotilde at once, before entering the house, while still in the open air and while everybody was standing.

"Well," exclaimed Jonzac, whom a specious pretext introduced into the telegram could not dupe, "that charming Olgar must have locked him up."

No one protested against the remark. The listeners knew that Des Frasses contributed a notable proportion to the maintenance of that demi-star at the theatre, to whom painters, authors, artists gave a half salute even when their wives were with them. Des Frasses' rôle as a bachelor,

then, had nothing which was not allowable. It even figured in the order of the day at the teas and fashionable meetings where the young man, by the mere fact of being admitted to them, had, voluntarily or not, brought as his contribution the details of his life and most of his secrets.

Madame Hobbinson confined herself to this reflection :

"What a pity! Such a good fellow! So poetical!"

"Yes, it's true," said Jonzac, "his talent isn't bad. He disinters Malfilâtre. How does the little piece begin which he recited to us the other day?"

"Daignez sourire à mes accens,  
Ne refusez pas un encens."

"Bravo!" said Madame de Prébois. "You must allow that is exquisite."

"Yes. I do not dislike those verses which talk to me about honey or rice or roses and which have a kind of faded taste. What adds still more to the unexpected character of their charm is that they come out of the beard of a big, surly pioneer, or fall from the height of a drum-major who has taken up his place at the head of a funeral procession."

Albert Mésigny then dilated on the talent as an actor which Des Frasses possessed. It may have been a vague desire, perhaps, to display an easy chivalry, perhaps merely his own importance, that urged him all at once to exhibit himself as in

much more friendly relations than he really was with his wife's friend.

"He would be the ideal actor," replied Jonzac, "if he could use his voice well, for he has a way of playing comedy and drama which immediately makes you think of the best singers in the opera."

During this dialogue, Madame Mésigny had not ventured any remarks, but confined herself to looking successively at each of the speakers who were expressing themselves about Des Frasses, and to giving them the polite attention of a person devoid of any opinion on the question, but disposed to gain instruction.

"Are we not going to dinner, mamma?" cried Roland, with that abruptness which is displayed by spoiled children, who in modern life sometimes take the place of the ancient chorus and translate with simplicity the sentiments of the bystanders.

"Indeed, it must be time," said his mother, "for here is your father quite ready."

Monsieur de Prébois, in a black frock coat, was approaching with all the gravity of a counsellor of the Cour des Comptes. Somewhat stout, but of tall stature, he had about him something equivocal, which constantly diverted observation, with his habit of mismanaging his elbows and of never appearing steady on his legs, and with his beard, which was gray in patches streaked with straw-colored hair and unevenly trimmed. He shook hands with everybody, with courtesy but without

cordiality. One could see, as it were, microscopic blood-shot specks through the black sharpness of his eyeballs. One could guess therefrom the result of shocks which had been felt by a man who was ambitious of mediocre and, therefore, very much sought-after positions, by a functionary who had been seized with many an attack of dizziness as he climbed the ladder of advancement. Finally, one perceived in him, altogether, one of those careful men who stick to their official employment and whom even their very enemies refrain from displacing.

"Where is the admiral?" said Monsieur de Prébois, who always directed his attention toward a man with a title, and after that to some one who had been in office even if he were so no longer.

Roland suddenly gave a sort of cry, and his grandmother seemed to understand the meaning of his call. In fact, in the distance she was seen coming out of a little pavilion in Chinese style, built on a hill which dominated the horizon, and where she had continued to remain with Monsieur de Kerguel after Madame Hobbins had left them there *en tête-à-tête*.

The two old people advanced side by side, the admiral very erect and very dignified with his seventy years, with a step rather hasty and yet restrained, and his lips compressed beneath his eagle-like nose and between his white flat whiskers. Madame Sorlin, on the contrary, was loquacious, prodigal in curt gestures with her large arms, and

slowly rolled forward her plump form, with eyes that gleamed like two light-houses erected above a flood.

As they approached the group the old lady became suddenly silent, and it was the admiral who spoke, so that one could hear what he said :

“ I agree with you. A little rain while we are indoors will do good.”

While these two late-comers exchanged greetings with the new arrivals, Madame Hobbins observed out of the corner of her eye Grand-mother Sorlin, who seemed to her to be affectedly turning her back upon her without the action being altogether noticeable by an indifferent spectator. The American then turned her pretty mouse-like muzzle toward the admiral, meeting his glance, which came and went like a courier on service who takes no time but for a relay.

The closed shutters made an artificial light in the dining-room, softly illuminated by numberless little lights on the table-cloth, which left almost in shadow the bare walls painted in light green and furrowed with arabesques of gold.

Two valets unctuous as beadles, in dress coats, short breeches, black stockings, and cotton gloves, drew back the row of chairs for the guests to take their seats.

The master of the house and his mother-in-law took the extremity of the rectangular table. The admiral, who for fifteen days had been and who for another week still would be a guest of the house,

until he went in his turn to prepare his annual reception in his domains in Brittany, sat in the middle between Madame and Mademoiselle Hobbinson, opposite to Madame de Prébois. The latter, separated from her mother by Jonzac, had on her right hand Trept, who was already bending his head toward his neighbor Clotilde. On the pink table-cloth flamed a dozen of wax tapers covered with globes of rose-colored china, and in front of each guest these lights, which scattered pearly reflections on every face, alternated with large vases of iridescent glass filled with beautiful flowers.

Before the conversation began, Madame de Prébois tasted for an instant the deep and ineffable joy which she always felt when she was surrounded by guests, whoever they were and whatever might be their number. Undoubtedly, if she had only her own preferences to satisfy she would have gathered together none but young people who were clandestinely inspired with tender sentiments toward each other. Nothing raised her spirits so much as to fancy there was a drop of gallantry in the blood which was circulating invisibly around her, or to catch the meaning of a word uttered, so to say, within her reach, as it came still warm and just sharpened in the silent forge of a heart.

Conversation was commenced by Albert Mésigny, and he spoke frankly in this circle, where circumspection prevailed both among those who scarcely

knew him and above all in those who knew him well. He called to Trept from one end of the table to the other :

"It seems that you have handseled a horse this morning and it does not quite suit."

Trept gave a nod of assent, easily guessing that the information came from Clotilde, and not venturing to contradict in any detail the story which it had pleased her to tell.

By a corresponding precaution Madame Mésigny hastened to add, with a comic solemnity :

"As a slave of my husband, I make him a faithful report of anything interesting that I see during my solitary trottings."

"Why don't you go with your wife, who must be bored by her loneliness?" Trept perfidiously replied, for he was a little piqued at the fact that Clotilde had believed that she could speak about him and, according to all appearances, felt it her duty to be silent about the simultaneous meeting of the morning with Des Frasses.

"So, my charming little friend," said Madame de Prébois, "you follow the prescribed *régime* indefatigably, in spite of this horrible heat."

Clotilde was delighted to have a chance to tease with impunity her crony, Trept.

"Oh, yes, I should feel great remorse if I failed to do so one single time till my departure for Fontainebleau."

Monsieur de Prébois, who never took any but a distant view of what happened at his house when

it could have no influence on his official situation, broke in with a sudden remark :

“Madame Nully-Lévrier has not come yet?”

“No, she has suddenly gone and taken up her residence with her father and mother. As far as I can decipher the terms of her letter, she has authorized her husband to come there and court her over again. Imagine, admiral, a husband flirting with his wife!”

“Confound it! if that isn’t droll! Why didn’t the woman demand a repetition of all the ceremonies which had to be performed before she was married? With a little more logic on her side, on this point, she would have succeeded in making the husband what, for the matter of that, he is, the more stupid of the pair; and he, you may believe me, if he had not found his account fully settled thereby, would at least have gained some advantage.”

Monsieur de Prébois remarked again :

“Why, I thought we were to have Monsieur des Frasses!”

This trifling question brought up the name of that young gentleman. Everybody began to touch on it delicately, returning to it at each course with the trained appetite which diners-out, who have been educated in the art of dining, have in the employment of their salt-cellar and with the taste which the world always has for speaking of the absent; in fact, for subjects to talk about, it is much better to choose persons who are not there.



"By the bye," said Madame de Prébois, turning toward Jonzac, "you know Mademoiselle Olgar. Didn't she sing the other day in one of her charming operettas?"

"Oh, yes. I know Monsieur Olgar, too. He's a very nice fellow—no pretence about him; good soul every way."

"One thing I don't understand," Mésigny remarked, "is why, if a man is going to be the lover of a married woman, he should not prefer a respectable person, rather than a tarnished one."

Upon this Trept took his revenge on Clotilde, but discreetly and nobly.

"My dear sir, I know our friend Des Frasses thoroughly. The old stock from which he comes has furnished him with ancient principles and a veneration of the upper classes. However vivid an impression may be made upon him by the charms of a lady in society, his admiration for her will always remain honorable and Platonic——"

This profession of faith encountered some doubts. Clotilde alone seemed to believe in it, and while she felt a deep peace in her bosom on that account, her soul became enveloped with a kind of light veil, as if it had been saddened by suddenly discovering that there were limits to her empire which had not been assigned by herself.

"As for me," said the admiral, "what surprises me is that the husbands of certain actresses continue to let them go on as they do, when they have succeeded in gaining on the stage as much

or more than the Minister of Marine. How is it that they never think of reclaiming their wives for their own selves—to enjoy their family circle with the competence already acquired?”

“Oh,” muttered Monsieur de Prébois, “now you know—custom, routine, and then these theatrical morals——”

“Ah,” said Jonzac. “Does not the best society offer to us examples of households still more stupefying from the rank which they hold? I understand, as the admiral has very well pointed out, that at the beginning of a career the husband, even if he be in love with his wife, above all, if he is in love with his wife, seeing her incapable of living in their poverty, should resign himself to shutting one eye and letting the other be closed; but my comprehension stops if I see the prolongation of such conjugal complacency when the couple have a house in Paris, a château in the country, equipages, picture galleries, consols, railway bonds, etc.; when the pair could equally aspire to the public and private honors toward which all large fortunes lead.”

“The trouble,” suggested Madame de Prébois, “arises when it comes to deciding the amount of income that has to be attained before a jealous tyrant, a proud and independent fund holder, becomes incarnate in the husband. I can hear, where I am, the deliberations of the couple. They will say to-day, ‘Oh, you know, as soon as we have fifty thousand francs a year,’ and then, when they

have them, the next day they think of building something or of refurnishing, and the conversation goes on, 'Well, all the same, if we could only raise our income to seventy-five thousand francs,' and so on without end."

"Ah, madame," exclaimed Clotilde, "it is horrible to jest thus on such matters. Was there ever on the face of the earth a husband degraded enough to discuss——"

Indignation choked the young woman.

"I will confess," said the admiral, "that when I was at the Gaboons I was witness——"

"Oh, yes, at the Gaboons," replied Clotilde, "but among us, admitting that there be here and there a husband who doesn't bother himself to learn how his wife pays her milliner's bills, it's pretty disgusting. Can't imagine anything more so."

"Come, let's be serious," said Madame Hobbinson, in a tone of negligent superiority which could not wound, because her accent disarmed it. "Do you sincerely believe there is a single woman among those received and invited into society capable of taking money?"

There was a regular hubbub of affirmation. The admiral, as if rather annoyed with this tumult, shook his head without taking any part in it, like a man who had learnt among the negroes a good deal about the human race, but who hoped for something better among the whites.

"Then," continued Madame Hobbinson, with

her voice so melancholy that her rather frivolous reflection fell with all the weight of cynicism, "then if there are such women, it is certain they have no children."

"Because it is a bore to have them!" exclaimed Madame Sorlin, darting one of her sharp looks. This was the first time she had taken any share in the conversation, and she did so with such an air that Clotilde instinctively pushed with her knee Monsieur Trept's, which was very close to hers, to draw his attention to such an expression of maliciousness in the old lady with whose superficial foibles they so often amused themselves.

And yet, taken altogether, Madame Sorlin was no worse than most of the others, but age had not taught her to disguise her physiognomy and dissimulate her impressions, which, year after year, became more widely separated from clemency. Thus, the state of mind in which she was could always be discovered, even if the cause was unknown; while the usual rule of people is not to show through the flexibility of their mask any dispositions except those which are not there.

Madame de Prébois continued:

"In any case, there is in our circle a lady about whom there is some talk, perhaps unjustly."

"Who is that?" cried one; "whom do you mean?"

"You know very well I won't mention any names."

"I know," said Jonzac.

"I'll bet it's not the same. To begin with, whom are you thinking of?"

The musician, bending toward the lady of the house, whispered the name of Madame Nully-Lévrier, while the rest of the party remained rather awkward, with a pretence of not trying to listen.

Very soon the name passed from lip to ear all around the table. Trept, indeed, tried to defend Nully-Lévrier, saying that he was a member of his club and a very good fellow; but he did so feebly, with the dominant preoccupation that he did not want to make himself the advocate of a ridiculous case.

"I would sooner have believed," said Clotilde, "that the talk was about Madame So-and-so."

But it was impossible to make her betray the secret of this anonymous allusion. The admiral turned mechanically toward Agnes to transmit to her the password which had been just communicated to him in his turn, but he remained confused, with his mouth wide open, when he saw the charming face of the young girl.

She was talking in a low tone with Roland and uttering little laughs, and, like him, took no interest in the conversation of the others. They were, yesterday or to-morrow, all alone, in the moonlight, at home in fact; and during the rare and short interviews when the attention of the girl had been drawn toward the free-spoken persons by whom she was surrounded, her looks had not

annoyed any one, for they were so pure that they did not indicate even astonishment.

After dinner, when Des Frasses arrived about nine o'clock, the company dispersed through a series of small, elegantly furnished rooms which formed in the first floor of the house so many *boudoirs* or retreats.

In the great drawing-room there was nobody but Albert Mésigny, finishing his cup of coffee by little sips, and the master and mistress of the house. The conversation there was the monotonous, easy conversation of persons who have nothing to say to each other and nothing to conceal from each other.

"You are pardoned fully," said Madame de Prébois to her visitor.

When her husband looked as if he wanted to capture Des Frasses, in whom he admired the *sous-préfet* of the past and the listener of the present, and to whom he had always to demonstrate and redemonstrate that a man cannot, ought not, to abandon his career, Madame de Prébois hastened to say, pointing to the line of apartments less brightly lit than that in which she was :

"You have some friends there who will rejoice very much to see you."

The young man still kept his place for the befitting length of time ; then he went on beneath a *portière*; the cords of which raised just high enough to let one glide through the folds of bro-

cade inflated by the night air from the garden which entered by all the windows of the façade.

In a little cabinet, Louis XV. style, feebly lit by a little lustre in copper in the midst of low screens, inlaid étagères, chiffoniers, and seats upholstered in silk, Agnes and Roland were standing, busy in transforming into a parting bouquet for the girl a whole crop of roses thrown pell-mell on a looking-glass table. Roland, penknife in hand, with attentive lips, was cutting off one by one every thorn, and Agnes, silent like him, watched him with equal care, and collected the dressed sprays in the hollow of her arm after having well dried them on her batiste handkerchief, with which she wiped also at times the varnish on the furniture. Absorbed in their work, they did not hear the advance of Des Frasses across the carpet behind them. As he said good-evening they turned together, but without any emotion either of pleasure or displeasure, and gave him that rapid shake of the hand which people do when nothing can interest or disturb them beyond their own petty affairs.

A burst of feminine gayety was heard through the other door which opened on the library of Madame de Prébois. Jonzac had very nearly upset, with his coat-tail, a little wooden clock with fluted columns which stood on a davenport. Madame Hobbison, reclining in one compartment of a *causeuse* and holding a book in a loose cover of embroidered satin, was looking over her shoulder at the musician. The latter, who was now kneeling

in the other compartment of the seat, framed in, with his elbows resting on the centre cushion, the somewhat loose hair of his companion, while he rolled his eyes in a way which he took good care never to exhibit before Madame Jonzac and which would make one die of love, of shame, or of laughter. The American adopted the last.

At first Des Frasses, when he came unexpectedly on this picture, feared he had committed an involuntary indiscretion. His first thought was that Jonzac had kissed or tried to kiss Madame Hobbinson, but she soon put him quite at his ease.

"Good-evening, Des Frasses," she cried gayly, and when the composer rose, rather sheepish-looking, to greet the new-comer, she seized his wrist with a cordiality that assumes an air of confidence and with a familiarity too ready to promise an easy sounding of its depths. Des Frasses thus had once more an opportunity of viewing a spectacle which had always checked his inclination, although it was very easy to capture, for falling into the nets of the pretty American.

"Now, my little bow-wow, don't be vexed at me! Why, all these stories are so much old Chinese to me!"

Des Frasses did not stop, and having to cross the library of Monsieur de Prébois, a severe-looking apartment, he walked on tip-toe in order not to disturb, during their after-dinner sleep, Admiral de Kerguel and Madame Sorlin, who were seated opposite each other in big arm-chairs of Cordovan



leather, and reposing, like Philemon and Baucis, calm in the warmth of the passing evening and without doubt pretty well tired of the unbroken evening of their life.

At the end there was the billiard-room, whence came the dry sound of ivory knocking about. When Des Frasses crossed the last threshold, he perceived Madame Mésigny, raised on a footstool, doubled in two, extending along the cloth of the table all the opulence of her figure and incessantly renewing vain efforts to make a beginner's stroke. At the cushion, Trept, quite imperturbable and complaisant in a smoking-jacket, was replacing the balls every time, just like a decent billiard-marker.

To excuse the carelessness of her attitude, Clotilde hastened to reply to the air of jealous melancholy that immediately spread over the face of Des Frasses.

"Confess, if I don't become a sylph it won't be my fault! As you see, never sitting down."

In fact, merely to recover an erect attitude, she had to accomplish a regular feat of gymnastics.

And then, to thank Trept, who the moment before had declared to her that she was a woman impossible to understand, according to a phrase which he had often noticed was very good to use, she remarked:

"Happily, your friend Trept is here this evening. If you had both been absent, the little party would have been no frolic."

After a few friendly words with Des Frasses,





Trept pretended to devote himself to cannons, massés, and coulés, thus permitting Clotilde and her new companion to exchange aside their "Why didn't you come?" and their "I have been so disappointed," futile remarks which were easy to foresee. Trept, besides, had just convinced himself, by some hardy attempts, that the fatal fruit was not yet ripe in the young woman's heart, and would not permit itself to be culled so readily by the hand of any marauder.

Besides, he liked to play billiards quite as much as to flirt. He played, moreover, just as he did everything, to perfection, and he would have tempted Clotilde or anybody else, with the same satisfaction of mind which he felt in getting three balls together in the corner of the table for the American series. All his enterprises, serious or frivolous, seemed to him to be very nearly of the same importance. The only scruple he felt about them was to execute them successfully, and to show above all things his physical address, although it might be united with a clownishness of heart that is vaguely dreaming of applause.

While this was going on, Madame de Prébois entered, bringing in her train all her little troop, which had been disbanded during the halt that followed the repast, but quickly fell into the ranks and stood at attention as she passed by.

Behind her came trays of refreshments. After three-quarters of an hour of talk about nothing, of coming and of going here and there, of confused

chatter and careless attitude, it was Monsieur de Prébois who announced that they must go and get ready for the train which he said was the most convenient because, thanks to it, he could go to bed at the usual time.

He managed, however, to conceal his annoyance at hearing his wife say to Des Frasses :

“As for you, my dear sir, you’ve only just arrived. I must keep you for an hour longer. Jonzac, I am sure, will have the kindness to remain, to keep you company on your return.”

The musician eagerly accepted this pretext to put off till near midnight the moment that would leave him alone—that is to say, that would leave him at home with his wife, in that solitude where a man feels himself to be two ; where the annihilation of hopes, the spectres of blighted ambition, in place of remaining confused and floating in the blackness of thought, reclothe themselves in the tangible, living form of a being who is by your side, who does not comprehend you, whom you cannot love nor even hate. Being thus conjured to remain, Des Frasses had to reconcile himself to see to the end an evening that had been totally wasted as far as flirtation was concerned. Clotilde, as she took her leave, threw between herself and him a shade of somewhat contemptuous discontent, such as one cannot fail to feel against a person whose bad luck has frustrated all the good which you had wished him.

Thus, Madame de Prébois succeeded in further

prolonging her reception, although in a languid style, after the departure of the principal group of her guests.

She praised the merits of Madame Mésigny, skilfully consulting Des Frasses' feelings in this respect, with all her sympathy for love, with all the curiosity of a woman who does not carry it out in practice, in one of those beatitudes of proxenetism in which certain mistresses of respectable houses bathe themselves, more inconceivably perhaps, and perhaps likewise more voluptuously than is believed.

It was a pleasure for her to perceive that Des Frasses was very much smitten with Clotilde. It was an equal pleasure to take as sincere the criticisms which the young man made on Madame Mésigny, from secret considerations of tact, in order to conceal the true state of admiration which he really felt; for if Madame de Prébois demanded that everybody about her should be making love, she still wished that the sentiments exchanged should only be such as those of which, if the case by any possibility could happen, she herself would have been willing to be the consecrated object.

During their return in the car, Jonzac, for the time overcome by Des Frasses, who had discoursed at length on the musician's work in the tone of a man who had a high idea of it, wished in his turn to display his interest in his companion; but, although the latter was an old acquaintance Jonzac,

as the result of a tendency of many years' standing never to hear or remember anything except what was said about himself, for himself, or against himself, knew little of the young man except his relations with Olgar, and nothing of his past and nothing of the future to which he was perhaps aspiring.

In despair how to start, he asked:

"You haven't known the Prébois very long, have you?"

"Six or seven months."

"It's a nice house?"

"Yes, very nice."

"They have there a little woman who puzzles me very much. Everybody will swear that she has a lover, even lovers, and no one is in a position to say who, where, or when."

Des Frasses, at a nonplus, kept his mouth shut, as he doubted who might be the person to whom Jonzac wished to allude.

"As for me," said the musician, "I think she is a long way better than her daughter."

Consoled with having thus discovered that it was only Madame Hobbins who was in question, Des Frasses amused himself by relating all that he had picked up here or there concerning that American lady. That is to say, that she was the daughter of a poor clergyman, and widow of a rich clergyman who came to Paris for the Exposition of 1878, and that she had remained five years uninterruptedly at the Hotel Meurice with trunks

which had never been thoroughly unpacked until a little while ago. Furthermore, that Agnes, and not her mother, would have a fortune.

"That old hag of a Madame Sorlin," replied Jonzac, "assured me that she has known Madame Hobbinson to be very sparing of linen."

"She draws a good deal of water—Madame Sorlin."

"Oh, yes, a big cargo. Her husband was contractor of public works; he built or rebuilt the greater part of the fortifications on the sea-coast. It was while he was building the citadel of Saint-Nazaire, about the year 1850, that his wife and he struck up an acquaintance with Kerguel, then a lieutenant in the navy, detached to service on shore."

Des Frasses assumed a look of connivance, to show that he was not so far behind the times, and that he perfectly appreciated this biographical detail that he knew quite well; and being in a humor to talk freely—

"I believe too," he ventured to say, "that Madame de Prébois——"

Jonzac reflected, seemed to collect and to weigh all the pros and cons which had tumbled pell-mell into his brain during many years spent in exchanging slanders with the world, and exclaimed:

"No! You can't say anything positive against her. To begin with, who is it? I know perfectly well people have said the admiral—bah! Now trust me; I'm like a member of the family. Emi-



lienne never loved anything except her sons, and her adoration for the one which she has preserved is enough for two—a big good-for-nothing, *en parenthèse*—but altogether he'll always be as good as his father."

"Monsieur de Prébois occupies a high position."

"Good heavens! he is a demonstration in flesh and bone of what a man who is absolutely null, as regards intelligence, can become in government employment when he enters it young, with good health, a competent fortune, a good table, and plenty of relations. He was appointed to office under the Empire, and to-day he has nothing else better to do than to seek to be made officer of the Legion of Honor by the men who have turned out his friends everywhere. Why, he must have talked you silly more than once in explaining to you that he was the only one of his colleagues of the same rank who was not a knight of the order. What has that got to do with us? Am I a knight?"

Des Frasses, indirectly touched with a subtle scruple as regards the rosette which decorated his button-hole, began to defend his late host.

"But, certainly, he is an excellent husband, very amiable, very ornamental."

"Confound it, yes!"

"She has a craze for having parties, hasn't she?"

"Oh, that's her business! To preside at a reception, to assume a regal position, above all, to do to new personages the honors of her at homes, to label every single one of the objects which she

possesses! When you've heard her say as often as I have, 'That was a present from Marie Antoinette to an ancestress'—ha! ha! ha! I can see her from here, that ancestress, Nanine or Toinon, jumping up when the bell sounded, in her coarse white petticoats."

Des Frasses felt himself more and more at ease by the side of a man of such independent mind; and just as a man who is not quite sure of singing in tune will sometimes run the risk under cover of a louder singer, he ventured to say:

"I confess that the excessive luxury of the house with its delicacies, with its thirty-six dishes——"

"Why talk of that? This wastefulness doesn't affect me. I only think to myself, 'My fine fellows, if I were to propose to borrow twenty-five louis from you at dessert, I shall see you all slide away.' I don't mean to say I have had any experience of it, but still I can warn you that if any day you want a cent for the expense of your household you won't find it with the Prébois; they will refuse you flatly, at the end of a dinner like that of this evening, where they have stuffed you with a hundred francs' worth of wine, a hundred francs' worth of early vegetables, and a hundred francs' worth of game out of season. They are quite ready to spend money on other people, provided that they eat up that money in their house and before their eyes, where they can see you eat it up without having to move from their seats."

While talking in this fashion, the two companions came to the Saint-Lazare railway station. They took leave of each other with that necessity of being cordial which is felt when men have been agreeing to talk tittle-tattle against others, with that gratitude which is inspired in you by a perspicacious observer, whose confidence in you, proved by communicating to you the documents of the case he has against the whole world, assures you that you are considered by him as something more than supernatural.

Then each of them went home, considering as true and regarding as in harmony with their preconceptions the approximative idea that each had made concerning what was inside a bag of skin in which he would not have liked to have been himself; and each summoned up, through the smoke of his cigar, the vision of the last face at which he had smiled and which appeared to him under the half-false, half-true light with which opinion, that negligent, meddlesome, prevaricating magistrate, contents itself to illumine the foundation of its judgment.





### III.

IT was about five o'clock in the afternoon on Madame Mésigny's last Friday, for she received on Fridays when she became tired of Mondays and next season people said she would adopt Wednesdays. Just from listening to the style in which she used to say "my Monday" and in which she still commended her Fridays to the good recollections of her friends, one could find an explanation of these perpetual changes in the pleasure she undoubtedly felt in marking every day in succession by her own possessive pronoun.

Already preparations for her departure had prematurely buried under covers almost everything in the little apartment of the Rue de Presbourg, everything which most represents life in the aspect of a furnished room. In the midst of the largest of the two salons, beneath the chandelier, which was in its swaddling-clothes, a heap of rolled-up carpet, of cushions, of things out of shape through packing, lay under some green serge, as under the sod of a tomb, and on a mantel-piece a tall statue displayed only his bronze feet through an old hole in his white shroud.

Nevertheless, to pass through this room was the

only way to reach the other, the gloomy and strangely encumbered apartment where Clotilde, alone for the moment, and half-stretched out in a reclining-chair that was at once both chair and footstool, was sitting with her figure erect against a perpendicular cushion. This was the attitude selected by the young woman for the time which she devoted to waiting for visitors, and the attitude which, from the excitability of her disposition and her physical animation, she immediately abandoned as soon as any one arrived.

Three-fourths of the room were crammed with an excess of furniture, so heterogeneous that Madame Mésigny seemed to be less in a reception-room than in a cleared-out corner of a fashionable store where a pretty shop-girl, pretending to play the lady, was enthroned. In the restricted proportions of this nook of the house which she preferred because all that was there was her own hereditary property, Clotilde amassed everything in the way of bric-à-brac and of bibelots that her parents, in the course of their separate existences or their travels, had collected; and she had done this, not with any thought of making it look better, but solely because she could stuff them in there. At one end a Samourai in wood, armed *cap-à-pie*, mounted guard on the border of mythological tapestry from the Gobelins. Engravings were perched among the branches of a panoply. On the top of a Boulle wardrobe stood an Italian *crédence*; on a varnished commode by Martin, figurines from Sè-

vres and from Tanagra were fraternizing ; there were kandjars and miniatures, marble and silver, plate and tin ; all so closely packed together that a visitor could not have found even a place to put her veil in. Back to back, and face to face, arm-chairs with heraldic carvings, damask sofas with cushions of down, seemed to be piled up with the sole view of resting the eyes and not the limbs, so few were the interstices between them. Only around the spot where Clotilde had installed herself, near the window, where the light was softened by a series of transparent hangings, there reigned a free zone, a sort of irregular polygon, bounded by the reëntering or salient angles of this strange bazaar, which, like the soul of its proprietress, was merely an orderly confusion. In this confined space, suitable, otherwise, for a person who was of an age and a taste to receive only one visit for four that she had paid, all the respiration, the animation, the current movement of possible incidents, seemed to be concentrated. Close to the young lady, tall palm-trees waved in the air ; perfume escaped from bunches of flowers plunged into tubes of large bamboo ; the samovar was smoking on a side table ; on a round table a dwarf clock was beating its tic-tac till it was out of breath, and three seats, now unoccupied, which the persons who had departed had left in the position that happened to be most convenient for talking, still turned toward Clotilde their attitude of familiar conversation.

She was reading, carefully, a novel that had appeared that very morning. At times she frowned with a little air of emotion that made her fray between her fingers the edge of her violet moiré girdle. At times she stopped reflecting, as she smoothed down a fold of her dress of maize-colored foulard, the color of which was almost pink, or, plunging one hand into the jet blackness of her thick hair, she gazed at one of the tiger claws with which her satin slippers were buckled. And then, as if to convince herself of her own existence, she nervously crossed and recrossed her two ankles, which her half-horizontal position displayed in their cover of heliotrope stockings.

The book was one of those which are devoted to love among the aristocracy, and might, like certain medical books, have been labelled "for the special use of fashionable people." In fact, patrician fingers turn over the pages of these books as if they were their manual for affections of the heart. The women above all are passionately fond of them; not so much from a taste for reading, to which they profess to be addicted, but from a feverish hope of finding there the diagnosis and the cure of their own moral trouble which is forever known and unknown.

The heroine, like Clotilde, was a woman misunderstood by her husband and quite disillusioned about him; as pretty as she was, kindly, compassionate, distinguished, generous, honest as she was.

"No, it's too bad; you could swear it is meant

for me," the reader continually uttered with perfect sincerity every time that the great lady of the story, in a delicate situation, displayed a new proof of pride in patience, of tact in sentiment, of superiority, of nobleness, of sovereignty.

From chapter to chapter, Madame Mésigny, influenced by a kind of suggestion, had arrived at discovering the explanation of her every-day conduct, in the statements of sensations which she had never felt, and in ideas to the height of which her imagination had never risen. Persuaded by a series of analogies, she asked herself, from time to time, in spite of the absurdity which she saw in the idea and by a delirium of pride which made her regard the matter as terrible and droll, if she herself was not the woman whom the author (by whom she thought she was quite unknown) wished to depict. And then, how could he have guessed at her? And thereupon she crossed and recrossed her heliotrope ankles displayed beyond the muslin of her dress.

Clotilde, then, was so far identified with the soul of her heroine that it was an absolute rending of her heart when the latter plunged into what the paragraph hypocritically called the "abyss," and nevertheless Madame Mésigny had foreseen this fall after the preparatory pages; though, while foreseeing it, she had not had the cruel courage to tear herself away sooner from the woman who was walking straight there, and to separate her own cause from her; so sympathetic and so inevitable seemed to her the culpable future.



To speak the truth, Madame Mésigny was revolted by the catastrophe; but, on the other hand, she could not help remarking how simply, easily, logically, noiselessly, without producing any apparent change, that catastrophe of which she had an unsurmountable horror could result.

This reflection led her to examine among the women of her acquaintance which of them seemed to her to be most capable of having taken a like step, and for a long time her thoughts at every image which she evoked ended in "Oh, nonsense!" or "Why not?"

The dominant impression which the book at present left upon her was not an excitement of the brain, nor an agitation of the heart, nor a disturbance of the senses; it was as it were the result of an irrefutable lesson, a demonstration of what was possible drawn from that which she had always considered imaginary, like the contact with some unexpected materiality, like the exposition of a panorama full of winding roads and strange occurrences.

Clotilde, then, was not intoxicated nor even much moved; she had only acquired a certain experience of which she was rather afraid. "Poor woman," she kept sighing, as she wiped a couple of tears from the fringe of her eyelids. "She was younger than I am. Who knows what I shall be soon?"

She thus concluded philosophically, without terror, without hope of anything, with a presenti-

ment that every age had its tendencies and was drawn toward an artificial state of mind which far anticipated the normal state, whither the first appeal to reality would recall it. She let fall on the carpet the book, which, like all toxic preparations, contained at once a poison and a violent remedy, and she opened wide her beautiful large eyes, rather too flush perhaps with her face, too round to be able to penetrate into the depths of the future, too bright not to render still more impenetrable the shadows of truth which, as far as she was concerned, began no further away than the end of her little *retroussé* nose.

At this period Des Frasses presented himself.

"How late you are," said Clotilde with her half-pouting smile.

The young man kissed her hand; then he continued to hold this hand in his own, which was as much embarrassed by it as his other hand was by holding his hat.

"You have been crying," he suddenly said, struck by the sight of a rosy line which was fading away beneath the eyes into whose depths he was gazing.

"Oh, no!" she replied briskly, already somewhat restored to her normal state of coquetry and with a tone of false sincerity which suggested all kinds of doubts.

"Why do you hide from me your trouble? Can I not console you?"

The voice of Des Frasses trembled under the agitation of a confession which he had never been

so near allowing to escape his lips. In discovering an expression of sorrow which he had not expected on lineaments fashioned for enjoyment, he had piled up a heap of stupid assumptions and rash inspirations, thanks to that natural facility which one has of always beginning by seeking for one's active or passive, past or future, part in everything that is going on before one.

"Have I not sufficiently entreated you," he continued, "to name me your friend in chief?"

"Do you really deserve it? In spite of myself I often feel distrust. There is Trept, for example; he is much more attentive than you. To-day he was here at three o'clock, which permitted him to remain at least a good bit of time."

This time the banderilla touched a peculiarly sensitive spot in Des Frasses, and plunging his fingers into the thickest of his beard, from which a faun on a cameo seemed to be grimacing between the hairs, he exclaimed:

"You like him so much, then, this Trept?"

"Listen: he is a very good-looking fellow; do not deny it; all the world agrees on that point. Grant, too, that he very often has wit."

"Let us admit it. Besides, I am on too good terms with him not to be desirous that you should keep him when he is here, or even that you should summon him when he neglects you."

"Clearly, then, you won't prevent his amusing me?"

"No, perhaps, nor my boring you."

This last phrase finally provoked Clotilde, because it called for a useless protest, especially when she considered the victim behind whom Des Frasses was sheltering himself. Like all persons greedy of compliments, she hated being put in a situation where she had to pay them or rudely take the risk of being silent. Well, so much the worse, she took a course which brought her back to the point where her interlocutor had begun to displease her.

"I never sought to detain Trept. The best proof that we get on very well together is that, as he was quitting me, he did not conceal that he was going to pay a visit to Madame Olgar. I took good care not to frustrate that charming project."

In truth, the evening before, in a scruple of good form, she had sworn never to pronounce the name of the actress in the presence of Des Frasses, and never to say anything which could give him the idea that perhaps she was jealous ; above all, never to modify a line of conduct in which Clotilde discerned for herself in all eventualities the best guarantee of repose ; but in this moment of irritation, and on such a tempting occasion, she was no longer so far mistress of herself as to withhold such a bit of spitefulness.

Des Frasses never moved a muscle. He had a solemn air, that air of not knowing what's the matter, that air of superbly demonstrating that it was not his fault, with which a well-bred man en-

velops himself when some unexpected sally warns him that he has been discovered trespassing on dangerous ground.

Madame Mésigny's cheeks grew hot up to the ears with a flush of shame.

Her regret was so thorough as to find even an indirect homage to herself in the exaggerated contempt with which Des Frasses just displayed for the attractions of what was, after all, a woman like herself.

"Why," she murmured with a confidential softness, "can I not speak of any one who is your friend without your sulking about it?"

Des Frasses, puzzled by the kindly tone of this new remark, hesitated to answer. He shrugged his shoulders several times and ended by uttering in a low, gruff tone:

"Trept is paying court to you."

"Oh, he's paying court to me! he's paying court to me! That's soon said. I don't say that he doesn't do so a little. Well, he does pay court to me, then. How does that trouble you?"

She looked at the young man fixedly with a mad longing to live the life of romance for a moment, while she was as provoking and composed as a picador. He frowned gloomily, bending his head till his chin touched his breast, and looking askance in distrust and wrath.

"You are right, madame. It ought not to trouble me at all."

"Certainly," she replied, "I appreciate very

much Trept's society, but I hope that you do not imagine——”

She disdained to finish the phrase and began quite a new sentence.

“Monsieur Trept is a good fellow, very devoted, at least I think so; but do you suppose for an instant that he can be anything else to me? What idea can you have of me? My word of honor, this is insulting! And this idea to come from you—from you! I couldn't have expected that! I am awfully annoyed.”

Henceforward Clotilde never failed to call Trept “Monsieur Trept” every time that his name came up in her voluble discourse. She declared she would show Monsieur Trept to the door without delay, if he should ever presume—what was, however, impossible—on the slightest freedom. Her indignation became sincere, yet at the same time, with an innate astuteness, she hesitated to lay down in a general system the rules of virtue beyond which Monsieur Trept must not step. Clotilde had the consciousness of being protected by her principles against all attempts of seduction, come from what points they might; but, in her caprice and in her indecision, she confined herself to boasting of her means of resistance only when they were entirely directed against Monsieur Trept.

“Ah,” cried Des Frasses, “you yourself will end by being in love some day! You will have, in spite of yourself, to love some one who will love you as much as you deserve.”

"Is that indispensable?"

"Yes; no one can escape love all their whole life through."

"Well, I shall love my husband—to begin with, how do you know that I do not love my husband?"

"Why, you cannot. His character is not compatible with your refinement. Never, you very well know, has he been capable of loving you."

"Excuse me, he has given me the very best proof," she replied rather dryly; and with this sentence she suddenly allowed to appear the exceptional situation which in her heart she created for the man whom she had married, and the privileges which she recognized that he possessed above all those of whom she was not the wife, and on whom she only bestowed the trifling favors which her husband left in desuetude.

Nevertheless these alternations of criticising one another or trying to please one another, this changeableness of humor, these sudden variations of disposition, caused between the young man and the young woman a slight embarrassment, an anxiety emanating from those dim presentiments which often occur when we are really expecting nothing and can foretell nothing, either good or bad.

Clotilde, gradually allowing her momentary romanticism to dissipate, took a turn in order to gain breath.

"You arrived home," she asked, "the other evening with Jonzac all right?"

"As well as one could, alas! without you. He

is a conversationalist so versatile, so diverting, so affable, so full of fancy—and of such a sound judgment——”

At each of these expressions Clotilde threw up her head, appearing to think that the measure was being heaped up too high.

“I warn you,” she said, “not to trust too much to that conversationalist of yours.”

“Why did you say that? Has he been speaking to you any ill of me?”

“No, no, not at all!”

She had, however, uttered this denial with such hesitation that Des Frasses, after close questioning, ended by learning that Jonzac looked upon him as a surly sapper, a kind of *Malfilâtre*, a sort of drum-major, one knows not what else.

This revelation put Des Frasses out of countenance, for, without possessing an excess of vanity, he was, like most people in the world, incapable of understanding the criticism to which he was liable, and consequently he was quite unprepared to receive such a stroke.

“What a cad!” he growled at last.

Clotilde seized the occasion to satisfy the zeal for equity with which, at times, she was possessed, in the juvenile and fugitive desire, that every one should be in his proper place down here and should be rewarded according to his worth.

“Now, it was just my husband, whom you criticised severely a minute or so ago, who was celebrating your merits in comedy when Jonzac called



you a '*basso non cantante*.' For in passing I may tell you he has a great deal of esteem for you, my husband has."

"Ah, madame, as to what I have said about Monsieur Mésigny, you will understand perfectly in what sense it was intended. I should be in despair if you were to accuse me——"

Madame Mésigny stopped him with a look which was softened in its fugitive expression.

"Make no excuses, my dear sir. I know you have a noble heart."

These words and the expression of those beautiful eyes touched every chivalric fibre that Des Frasses had in him. He felt himself all at once prepared for all sacrifices to obtain in exchange the love of this charming woman by whom he had been so thoroughly understood, while at the same time the happiness of his good friend Mésigny should, as far as possible, experience no alteration.

As he had entered the anteroom of the suite where now such a transport was shaking him, he had only experienced a palpitating resignation to undergo the commonplaces of an every-day flirtation; but as he had crossed the threshold, the sight of the preparations for departure had roused him from his indifference, and then those traces of tears on Clotilde's face! Then there had been this kind of quarrel on the subject of Trept, and likewise the knowledge of the insulting hostility of a person upon whom he thought he had made a favorable impression. Within his bosom his pas-

sion, somewhat blunted in its scabbard, steeled itself against sadness, jealousy, and contempt, and against his indignation at being suddenly injured in his *amour propre*. Then there were those enigmatic eyes of Madame Mésigny, which at present were looking at him as, it seemed to him, he had never been looked at before.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked, for indeed her study of Des Frasses had for her all the interest of looking at some one in whom there is some strong internal emotion.

This simple question gave the final impulse to the plunge which the lover was still making desperate efforts to refrain from, just as the whistle of a marmot sometimes is sufficient, in certain states of the atmosphere, to produce an avalanche of rocks that have been in equilibrium for centuries. For an instant longer a remnant of prudence made him balance on the point of deciding whether it would not be better to leave things as they were till autumn, when Clotilde returned; but in his timid nature the fatality of an energetic action could not develop itself without overthrowing all his grounds of resistance.

"I think," said Des Frasses with warmth, as he raised his hands clasped together—"I think that in a week you will not be here and that I—I shall be I know not where, a body without a soul. I think I don't like anybody paying court to you. I think that all the world is bad and that you alone are good, adorably good."

Then throwing himself impetuously on his knees before Clotilde, who had had no warnings of his action, he seized with some violence her wrist in order that the open palms, held side by side, should receive in their hollow his thirsty lips, and he muttered with an almost unintelligible sound, his face hidden, showing only the bristling of his brush-like hair :

“ I love you ! I love you ! I love you ! ”

Clotilde, stupefied, had not uttered a syllable or made a movement. So astounded that no resolution could form in her mind, she preserved, in spite of everything, her polite good-nature, which allowed her to leave her hands in the position where the beard of Des Frasses tickled them. In all the security of an incorruptible coquette, she had never anticipated any consequences from her behavior other than those from which she could escape by some happy replies. She had never confronted the part which might fall to her lot when matters came to action, and when it was necessary to repress acts by acts. And now here she was, lost in her immobility, while her reason had taken flight and left her body there forgotten. Nevertheless, at intervals in the total overshadowing of her conscience and in the depths of her emotion, there dawned a vague enchantment, the sunrise of a memory ready to be born all plump and rosy, with which she would illuminate her inner being when this unexpected scene should have ended.

During this delay, Des Frasses, still on his knees as if he were petrified, with his eyelids closed, dared not stir from the attitude which he had assumed with all the imposing vigor of a man who has the reputation of carrying himself well. And this *tableau vivant* had nothing ridiculous about it ; it was even painful, like everything which takes place in silence and in the struggle of great human attempts, whatever the object may be. Des Frasses, having hurled forward his courage to the first shock, tried to persuade himself that he had triumphed, and as he sought to find what he might still have to dread and found nothing, his inability to discover any perils really paralyzed him, made him dread the hidden snares and secret traps with which minds otherwise sound imagine that the irregular paths and cross-roads of life are thickly scattered.

At length, when he ventured to raise his face and look to the pallid countenance of Clotilde, when his eyes, still dreading the light and changed from what they were before, met the new eyes of the young woman, the species of charm which had so long kept their attitudes unchanged dissipated itself like magic.

Clotilde's forearm was, roughly and indignantly, interposed between their lips, and she quickly drew back to escape the clasp of the arm which remained extended toward her in imploring agony.

"If you move a step," she stammered, in a voice which sounded strange to her own ears, "I ring the bell—I will call out."

"O madame, condescend to allow me a word! You see in me the most unhappy of mankind."

All their actions had simultaneously taken a somewhat theatrical cast in the episode which had suddenly dramatized the commonplace of their relations. They spoke and moved like actors at their *débuts*, awkward in gesture and declaiming apostrophes which they had heard or read.

"I do not know what prevents me ordering you out."

"Love deserves some compassion."

"You have abused my confidence."

"Good heavens! can it be she who is talking this way!"

A degree of calm had returned to Clotilde, as she noticed the reassuring reserve into which the guilty party had retired.

"You have insulted me!" she muttered, still unappeasable. "I ought not to receive you any more."

"No, madame, I have not insulted you. You and my mother are the beings I venerate the most."

These humble expressions began to obliterate the wrinkles from Madame Mésigny's brow, and she now found herself capable of looking into a glass and composing herself.

"If you desire," she continued, "that I should authorize you to call again, you will swear to treat me with respect for the future."

"I do respect you!"

She shook her head with a wilful, childish expression.

"No, no, no! You do not respect me."

Des Frasses raised his arms to heaven, as if to call it to bear witness to the utterance of such a blasphemy.

"I wish that you would never, never more talk to me of love. Will you swear it?"

"I cannot," he answered, half-discouraged, half-prompted by confused returns of hope.

"Then let us part. I have no longer the right to pardon you."

Des Frasses hesitated, quivered on his feet, then as he stepped backward he asked permission to shake, for the last time, a hand which probably he had only to seize. But, with all the alertness of a scholar who is afraid of a ferule, Clotilde concealed behind her back her hands and her arms up to the elbows.

Thereupon Des Frasses walked back slowly, very slowly, with an air of bitterness and humiliation under the grand salute which he performed.

The bosom of Madame Mésigny swelled with bitterness at witnessing such a departure of such a precious flirt, perhaps the best of all her flirting friends, her surest store-house for sighs and gossip, a whole lost treasure of futile attractions and little shudders to be encountered. Yes, six months of seed-time and cultivation blasted at one stroke, just when the whole bed of flowers was in full bloom! She was on the point of proposing an

arrangement, but she could not formulate its terms quick enough. Since she did not take the initiative by inviting him, he refrained from stopping of his own accord when he reached the folding-doors through which he resigned himself to take his final leave.

Henceforth both cherished an ardent curiosity to discover what each might really think of the other. By a mutual simplicity they attributed to the other soul a wilfulness in mystery, an order in complication, and an initial plan of behavior, and neither of them perceived that the chaos presented by one brain was only the reflection of the opposite brain.





#### IV.

IN the course of each year, Admiral de Kerguel received his friends at a country house which he had built in the wild and stormy part of the Morbihan, in the isle of Ys, which had been the property of his family from time immemorial. The extent of the domain was so confined that the old sailor could entertain the illusion that he was still on board some ship when he saw the waves dashing on all sides and so close to him, and while he could inhale their spray.

A week had already passed since Madame Sorlin, her daughter, and her grandson had arrived, and it was not yet known if Monsieur de Prébois would have leisure to come; this uncertainty, however, left the whole company quite indifferent.

Madame de Prébois loved the solitude of the island of Ys because she could find there only remembrances of things and not the tiresome memories with which persons whom we chance to meet at watering-places sometimes furnish certain spots. There, too, her mother, with whom she lived almost constantly, always showed herself in a more equable temper, as soon as the fatigues of her journey were over. Finally, Madame de Prébois experienced a peculiar happiness in being able to



possess for some time completely her adored son, in a kind of seaside resort where there were no casinos in which young people dance and catch cold on leaving, where there were no cigar shops, no gambling-rooms, no persons hiring out little pony carriages which have a very fashionable look and which at the first turn go "crack!" The admiral's cutter was there too, at anchor, but Roland never asked to make use of it.

The latter, indeed, at the beginning of his residence here never ceased to exhibit the languor or the feverishness of a particular impatience; like a young captive animal, he passed the greater part of his time in prowling restlessly about his cage.

When he had spent twenty minutes in walking around the coast of the island, he tried in vain to achieve it in a quarter of an hour; then he abandoned himself to profound repose, stretched out on a sofa, his boots on a cushion and his head down.

On this day Roland at first made up his mind to fish, then to sketch, then later on he almost lost his temper because he could not procure a roller of which he had need, so he declared, to smooth a tennis green which was already divided into two parts by a vertical net stretched across it; in brief, a nervous state of excitement had laid confirmed hold of him.

During the day he went and consulted a hundred times a sun-dial that stood at the top of a little marble pillar erected in a bed of geraniums on the highest point of the island, where these cultivated

flowers were almost the only ones that succeeded, and whence, like a day light-house, they threw far over the gulf their bright scarlet, between the ever-moving azure of the waves and the motionless azure of the sky, which on this afternoon was exceptionally clear.

"It's more than four o'clock," he said at last, as he stepped up to the veranda. "Ought not the boat to be in sight?"

The two ladies continued their embroidery in silence and with a rhythmical movement.

Monsieur de Kerguel, who had a newspaper under his eyes, had the appearance of not quite understanding the question, but soon readjusted a *pince-nez* which had slipped down to the end of his nose and could not be of much use to him in his pretended reading. He took out his watch, and with the air of a man at an age which need not be in a hurry about anything—

"No, my boy, there's no delay. You've no right to complain yet."

"For heaven's sake, Roland," said his grandmother, "let us enjoy our moments of tranquillity; there will be noise enough as soon as the Americans have landed."

In spite of her authoritative tone, she looked inquiringly at her daughter when she added, with her enormous shoulders under her knitted shawl:

"Well, I will not put on another dress; they are not coming here to teach us the fashions, I suppose."

Madame de Prébois was scrupulously dressed in a *deshabillé* of a Japanese style and of a thoroughly insular design, and she looked, with the attention dictated by her filial respect, at the great bonnet of black lace and full-blown pansies which Madame Sorlin had hoisted for the first time, and she said :

"You look splendid so."

Thereupon Madame de Prébois turned toward the admiral, and asked him with an indiscreet vivacity which the person addressed always refuses to regard as treacherous, because then he would have to confess that his private life moved under influences which he could not avow :

"Well, my old friend, why do you make a point of this year of asking the Hobbinsons here?"

The eyes of Madame Sorlin gleamed like two carbuncles and seemed to say to her daughter :

"You've done a fine thing in putting that question to him."

Monsieur de Kerguel cursed in his heart the questioner whose maladroitness brought up a heap of things which he supposed had been swept away, and as recrimination was impossible, he dissimulated the grimace which one makes when one has cause to feel that inexplicable attraction which somebody's heel has for one's corns.

"Well, ladies," he murmured anxiously, "what I did was entirely for you, just to gratify you with a little more movement and gayety in the island. If I could have imagined that I was running the risk of displeasing you, then certainly——"

"O mamma," interrupted Roland, "you are kind, you are very kind! But what amuses me is the idea of Agnes coming here."

Madame de Prébois slightly contracted her eyebrows, which a pencilling predisposed to express harshness.

"My child," she replied, "when that madcap friend of yours is here, you must both of you take care to keep your parents company a little, and not to be always straggling no one knows where, like little vagabonds."

"Yes," remarked the admiral, who thought the diatribe of Madame de Prébois was out of place, "poor Roland, let us consider him a little. Confound it! he has need to get a whiff of youth in his companions."

And the old sea-dog thus sheltered behind the responsibility of this pale and frail youth, his white head, his robust seventy years, his campaigns, his orders of the day, and his old authority, while over all, in the background of his recollections, squadrons were performing evolutions and broadsides thundering.

Roland was vexed and quitted the place, but soon returned at a run with a joy unalloyed by bitterness, and holding a telescope pulled out.

"There is the boat!" he exclaimed. "It has already passed the Ile aux Moines."

A few instants afterward the whistle sounded from the little boat, which, on certain days of the week placed various points of this land-locked archi-

pelago in communication with the continent, and its splashing wheel soon brought it alongside a promontory, where the high tide reached up to a sort of landing-place.

Monsieur de Kerguel and Roland hastened to assist Madame and Mademoiselle Hobbinson to disembark. They were followed by a lady's maid laden with paper boxes, whose wide-awake countenance believed it to be its duty to smile a welcome to all the bystanders.

The four ladies at once abandoned themselves to the preliminary effusions, which mean nothing, of their embracing and kissing sex.

"It is fairyland! 'tis like a dream!" Madame Hobbinson kept saying. "So we are now in your dominion! We have not to look to any other laws than yours. Oh!" she cried, as she saw a huge trunk flung heavily to the rock, and ceased to listen further to corrections of her ideas of political geography by which Monsieur de Kerguel, uneasy and charmed, had immediately concealed his embarrassment.

The admiral's valet took charge of the baggage with the assistance of the keeper of the island, who was at the same time the gardener, the boatman, and the butcher. He was a Breton with long hair, a broad leather belt, the calm, pallid face of a martyr, an obstinate chin, and a stern look as of one of the last of the Chouans.

Agnes did not speak.

She bent her head forward, all rosy with

pleasure, and left her hands hanging down, her supple little hands, embarrassed and empty, since the despotic attentions of Roland had taken from her her sunshade, her smelling-bottle, her tennis-racket, and a paper bag full of raisins and crumbled cakes.

While they were on the road, Madame Hobbinson went into ecstasies at the arrangements of the walks, over some aloes here, some fig-trees there, over the effect of a vase covered with honeysuckle before a clump of laurestinus.

"It is a real palace," she said as she came in front of the house, in which the background of bricks brought out all the brown projections of its outlines. "Why, you have swallows!" she cried, when her eye, which searched all around, had discovered the clay nests beneath a kind of machicolation.

"But the warm breezes bring me sometimes nightingales also, down there in my wood—at least so they tell me," answered the admiral, who was gesticulating in his exhilaration.

He pointed to a grove of pines which encircled the little farm-house where the keeper was lodged, and which towered above the tile roof, with their bending summits pointing in the direction imprinted on them by the weight of the gales that struck them from the ocean.

"Would you like to go up to your rooms at once?" the two ladies asked, for they, having already been installed, took the initiative and had

all the ease of persons who felt themselves quite at home.

"I will wait till my trunk is unpacked," replied Madame Hobbins as she hung up her hat on a peg in the anteroom with the mechanical familiarity of a person who also is somewhat at home.

Monsieur de Kerguel went away to give his commands to his servants, and from time to time they heard his active step and his busy voice.

"You bring us treasures of news?" asked Madame de Prébois. "You have only just left Paris, haven't you? Can you tell me what has become of the Mésignys?"

"They have taken up their abode at Fontainebleau, Rue de l'Arbre Sec, in a very pretty cottage, it seems, and they are busy in losing their heads, at least she is, by the rehearsals of *tableaux vivants* which they are about to give at Tournezy. I had information about it eight days ago from Trept, who went to the château with Des Frasses. The Balbenthals raise a hue-and-cry to have their performers in their own house."

"Do you take any part in them?" remarked Madame Sorlin, without raising her eyes, as she returned to her work.

"Oh, no! 'Tis next week," remarked the American lady, who at once perceived that the brevity of the delay was not received as an absolutely peremptory reason; "and it is probable that between now and then I shall not receive an invitation,"

she added, recovering herself with all the suppleness in which she excelled.

“Well,” muttered Madame de Prébois, “they give themselves a deal of trouble, these Balbenthals, for the sake of catching very few members of society, and then they think that is a reception. Why, in that case the manager of a circus has a reception every evening—besides, at this period there will be nobody——”

Thus the mistress of the house, whose season had closed, expressed the contempt which every idle person feels toward those who by uninterrupted work get ahead of them in any rivalry. A tyrannical indignation, an anger like that of a workman on a strike, suggested to her that there ought to be no permission granted to keep certain places of reception open when the others thought it their duty to shut up.

At this moment Agnes, who had already been told by Roland which was everybody's door on each landing, came to tell Madame Hobbinson that now everything was ready in the room assigned to her, and they were only waiting for her to take possession.

While the mother and daughter ascended the staircase amid the pungent, wholesome odor of varnished wood, preceded by Madame de Prébois, who had kindly charged herself with the functions of introducing them in default of Monsieur de Ker-guel, still invisible, the girl whispered :

“You know we are on the second floor. Roland



says there is a view there beyond compare ; he, poor fellow, is on the ground-floor. They rise very early, then Madame de Prébois has her chocolate brought her ; Mariette can bring up yours. She sleeps at the farm, does Mariette ; it's well-water that is in the jugs. They say it is soft, oh, so soft !”

When they reached the second story, Agnes, with a rapid movement of her forefinger, pointed out the localities and said in a low tone :

“ Here you are ; here I am ; you have the admiral's room ; there isn't a looking-glass on the front of the wardrobe. The admiral has had his bed placed in his observatory—you remember it down there—the big tower which we saw—well, there it is, an iron bed not more than a yard wide—just fancy ! ”

“ All right, my little pet, my little chatterbox,” said the mother to stop her at length, and Madame Hobbinson, left alone, proceeded to make for the dinner a very simple toilette, but dressed her hair with great care, for which a very narrow, long mirror, that seemed to have been proportioned by the tall, thin figure of the admiral, had to serve. She displayed pell-mell, on a massive oak table and the mantel-piece, which was laden with the bronze of a pair of candelabra, all her assortment of odds and ends, fans, an ink-bottle in Russian leather, a box of violet powder, tortoise-shell hair-pins, and other toilet articles. In a moment this unattractive room, to which the crossing of two sabres, the bust of the admiral with his decorations and portraits of ves-

sels larboard and starboard gave a nautical austerity and chill, received the perfume of womanliness ; it was, as it were, a thrill of life animating the rigidity of the furniture. Sachets alternated with forgotten receptacles for cigar ashes, and these objects, indicative of the two sexes, ended by blending into a sort of libertine harmony.

During dinner, Monsieur de Kerguel redoubled his excuses for the want of comfort which they might have to undergo in his house and for the monotony of the rare amusements at this end of the world.

But Madame Hobbison praised the originality of such a dwelling and the distinction given by its oddness.

"Just think," said Roland to Agnes, when they left the table. "There is a dozen of menhirs here."

"What is a menhir?"

"As for that," Madame de Prébois interjected, "no savant can explain. When you have seen them, my dear girl, if you can only form a system, you must communicate it to us at once."

"They are large stones," said Roland, "twice as high as you and twice as broad as grandmother, which have been planted upright in the air for hundreds of centuries."

"By the devil!" added Madame Sorlin, who was hurt by the comparison her grandson had made and who wished to show that she followed the course of the conversation.

"No, no, madame," Monsieur de Kerguel ob-

jected with animation: "these blocks of stone are some pagan warriors who were petrified by Saint-Cornely. Your window, Mademoiselle Agnes, looks straight on a group of these wicked hirelings; they are all in a line at the end of the field which I should like to-day to have sown with roses for your pretty eyes in the place of its present wild growth. At least, if the wind rises soon, if the moon is overcast, if the undergrowth quivers, you will have plenty of chances, as you look through your lattice when midnight is sounding, to see the dance of the *couriquets*, the *cournils*, and the *cournicanets*——"

In spite of the amiable smile which accompanied these words on the lips of the old man, Agnes continued to look at him with such dread and astonishment as rendered her speechless. She experienced, in the enervation of delight which she felt in being again in the company of her friend, a strange longing to shed tears at these melancholy flowers of fable which were bursting open around her.

Later, after all "Good-nights" had been said, when she found herself alone, separated from her mother by an almost unknown passage, within four strange walls hung with red and striped with black, in a room where she did not know how the night would behave, she shivered with a transient chill in her little brain. She dared not fix her eyes on a chest of drawers nor on the neighboring chairs in that strange bizarre Breton style, in which the

pieces have issued one by one from the torments of the lathe. Her heart beat so as, several times, to interrupt her prayers, and instead of opening the curtains to look at the mysteries of the country which lay outside, she pinned the two pieces together from top to bottom. For a very little more she would, like a cat in a strange place, have crept under the bed prepared for her slumbers. Finally, she enclosed herself in the white folds of her mosquito-net, keeping her lamp lit and her eyelids obstinately closed, with a finger at each ear so that she might not hear when the magic of a great clock (which for that matter wasn't going, but whose remains were standing up in a corner) should ring out the twelve strokes of the predicted hour.

That hour of midnight Monsieur de Kerguel, on the contrary, heard approaching to the tic-tac of his watch, amid the lulling silence of his house, in the bath of light which the moon poured through all the windows of the belvedere where the old man was reflecting. •

Opposite, in the distance, between the peninsulas of Rhuis and Locmariaquer, there was the channel, the gateway to the open sea, the threshold of the Atlantic, leading to that sea of liberty over which the admiral had so often galloped with the winds, never sure of returning yet always convinced that on his return he would not find broken on the shore that part of the life which he had left. And every time that Monsieur de Kerguel had

returned to harbor the same heart was there, warm with life in spite of wasting years, and forming by long habit such an integral part of the heart that returned, that the wounds were soon closed, and scars superimposed on scars transformed what had merely been a tender regard into the firmest, the hardest, the most solid of all things.

All around the old man, as he watched, the waves were rocking, and chanting, as it were, with a melancholy calm a psalm beneath the blue transparency of the evening. On the left the Island of Arz, narrow and flat, extended its four arms on which the village, built in the form of a cross, formed, with the projections and reflections of its white houses, the marine crucifix of this scattered Christendom.

Then Monsieur de Kerguel recognized, as it rose up from beneath the retreat in which he was meditating, the sleepy and heavy respiration of his old friend. With it forty years of their past, intense and snoring, distant and near, rose up toward him and brought forth a swarm of painful recollections or delicious remorse, that breathed the trouble of human life across the peace of the material world in this serenity of nature.

To escape the anguish that rose to his temples, he turned his eyes toward the blue of the heavens, which some darker tones made violet here and there beyond the first zone of the moon's radiation. Beneath the celestial vault the stars twinkled feebly,

like clandestine torches lit for the consecration of nocturnal nuptials.

. . . . .

Next day, having risen very early, with his cheeks reddened by the freshness of the morning breeze, Roland, with his two dogs, gave a hunting-cry quite without precedent in the island, and exactly, as it happened, under the spot where Mademoiselle Hobbinson was reposing. He stood on tip-toe, like a cock, in order to whistle to a greater height, with his india-rubber soles, with his hands in the pockets of his white flannel trousers, with a coat of the same material, and without a waistcoat. The end of his dark purple tie streamed beneath a sailor-knot, and he had pulled down to his ears as firmly as the capsule of a bottle, his white flannel cap marked with a red star.

These proceedings necessarily obliged Agnes to half-open her window. She hurriedly flung around her a dressing-gown, which she held together with one hand at her waist and the other at her neck, and with her hair all down, like a little savage in the primitive confusion of awakening, she smiled through the undulating and golden tendrils of her virgin locks.

When the young man cried out, "Good-morning!" "Hush!" she said with a prompt finger, and disappeared as if she had not been authorized to display herself without more preparation.

At any rate, she was not long in dressing herself, and the Robinson of eighteen could soon conduct

his Robinsonne, bareheaded, in a muslin gown, and with her hair hanging down to her waist, to make an inventory of what their island contained. They began by visiting the chapel, a consecrated hut hanging over the sea from the top of a cliff which a short iron bridge thrown over a cleft in the granite connected to the Island of Ys. They traversed the field of the Druids, which Agnes thought very ugly and very uninteresting; then the potato field, which vegetables, she said, had never presented themselves to her before with such an aspect. They descended the slope of the quay where the admiral's cutter was pulling at its hawsers, and Agnes several times pinched the arms of her companion as though she thought to hold him back by the sleeve if he were going to do anything imprudent.

"Bah!" said Roland, with a boastful gesture and with a certainty of evoking only a soft reply. "A nice misfortune it would be if I should drown myself! Would you go into mourning?"

"You are stupid!" she cried, simply.

They then inspected the little pine grove, with the music of its needles set moving in harmony by the wind. Then they went round the farm, where the approach of the dogs started a big black pig.

"Well, you see we have something to eat," said Roland, as he set his dogs at it.

"Goodness! are they going to kill it while we are here?"

own, a  
to mak  
. The  
ted b  
ff whic  
in th  
hey tra  
hought  
potato  
er pre  
aspect  
re the  
s, and  
com-  
back  
g im-  
and  
"A  
my-  
  
with  
ony  
rm,  
ack  
  
id  
  
re







"Perhaps!"

"Poor animal! It's so horrible, but indeed you ought to have thought about having it killed before. And these pigeons, are they to be killed too?"

"The pigeons and the chickens and the ducks," said Roland, with gayety.

Then pointing to a little heap of plump rags and naked limbs which was playing beside a cow that was lying down—

"That's one of Grégoire's six children. When the worst comes to the worst, they eat the fattest. Good-morning, Madame Grégoire," he cried to a woman who was still young, with a bad face, much tanned, brown beneath the backward floating wings of her quaint bonnet. "She is three-quarters idiot," he resumed, "and doesn't speak French. All her grandparents were shot by the Blues. Why! Don't you know these stories?"

The young man began to hum an air which the Breton woman at once heard and accompanied by motions of her head, with that musical instinct possessed by certain animals, and with her mouth wide open, leaning on a churn which she was working.

Grégoire  
Prends ta vierge d'ivoire,  
Prends ta gourde pour boire,  
Prends ta poire à fusil.  
Nos Messieurs sont partis  
Pour la chasse aux perdrix.

"Is there a beach?" said Mademoiselle Hobbinson.

"Why, yes; a very swell one. Would you like to bathe?"

"I do not know if mamma would permit me."

Then they went and sat down side by side at the end of the creek on a bank of sand which the ebb tide had left with an acrid scent of seaweed.

At first they did not say a word. Both of them leant on the palms of their hands, their looks gazing into the distance in parallel lines, as they fingered the barren sand which the sun had not yet dried, and then devoted themselves to the operation of picking out the little bits of mica which had got into their skin.

"You will find it very funny," said Roland abruptly. "All the villages in the Morbihan round about us have a strange custom in their marriages. The women ask the men."

"Well," said Agnes, throwing her head up, "I should not like to live there."

"Why, if you please?"

"But can it be possible for a girl to—to— One must be entirely devoid of shame to be the first to make a declaration to a gentleman."

"Ha! ha! a gentleman! They are not gentlemen. They are sailors, petty fishers."

She made no reply. Her quick thought passed away beyond the archipelago and its natives, for which she cared not, to rise straight into dream-land.

In the darkness of this silence, Roland saw one bright point glitter.

"Come, Agnes," he said archly, "grant that it would be more suitable for a young man to dare to—as you say to declare himself to a—woman."

By the thrill which the last words of her companion made Agnes feel at that moment, she suddenly understood that she had been promoted to the highest dignity of her sex.

"I am convinced," she said. "For my part, I shall never marry."

"You prefer to keep your liberty." He uttered the word liberty in a spiteful tone, as if this term would express for her something which was known and understood and well studied out.

"Oh, my liberty! I don't think so much about that—my liberty—only——"

"Only what? Couldn't you make up your mind to leave your mother?"

Agnes showed by a little wry face that she could resign herself to such a separation.

"Then I can't imagine what obstacle—perhaps you don't like babies!"

"I don't hate them; and then one does not always have them when one is married. But I have never reflected on what it would be like to have a baby. I rather think I should be amused."

"Then what could prevent you from being married?" Roland muttered, with his head between his hands, in a rage half amusing, half painful.

Agnes continued to trifle with their two hearts,

without deciding to relieve herself from that indistinct remorse which she experienced when she felt her inseparable paroquets live much and suffer a little as she took them, all warm, in each of her hands, to slowly kiss their beaks.

"To begin with," she continued, "to whom would you like to marry me? I do not pretend, most certainly, to be pretty, but surely you will not say that you think me ugly."

"You are the prettiest thing in the world."

The tone of this judgment thrilled Agnes, who could no longer refrain from smiling as she continued to talk.

"I don't know why, but I fancy they give me a bad character. As for that, mamma is sometimes wrong to scold me out aloud in houses where she is not under any restraint. Well, let us see whose wife I could be. Not the wife of Monsieur de Travières, nor Monsieur des Frasses, nor Monsieur Trept, nor certainly Monsieur de Cernex—oh, what a fright!"

"And Maurice Balbenthal?"

"Now, Roland, he is too young."

"Excuse me, he is the same age as I am."

"Why, our families would think you too young. People say the husband ought to be at least five years older than the wife. Perhaps mamma would not care, but your parents——"

"My parents! my parents! Pretty talk this, of being five years older. Is not Madame Nully-Lévrier a year or two older than her husband?"

"Don't brag about that ; they've always need to be making up. And then, Roland, I don't belong to your religion."

"Well, you'll change."

"Perhaps, if mamma wouldn't say no."

They were silent, having come to no further agreement, and yet in their reciprocal consciences everything seemed henceforth in regular order without their having had to utter those solemn vows of which they had not the audacity to imagine any formula, but which for a long time had impressed them as an obligation to be fulfilled.

Some minutes later Madame de Prébois, having discovered in what sequestered spot the two young people, with their fancy for *tête-à-tête* were spinning the light threads of the future, called them back in a severe tone. Disturbed to the very depths of her heart by the visible mystery of this growing love, she became an apostate, as women of imagination do who profess patriotism up to the time when they perceive that their son is of age to be called up into the army.

Thus it required cross and banner to obtain from her permission for her son to go on a boating expedition to Larmor with Agnes and Madame Hobbinson as chaperon.

Every Sunday, indeed, while the island possessed a house full of guests, the admiral sent his cutter ashore to bring over a priest who said mass in the chapel of Ys, lunched, and went back before evening. Roland promised himself such a *fête* on

this occasion, and Agnes was so enraptured that Madame de Prébois had to give way, stipulating only for fine weather.

As on Sunday morning the sky was beyond reproach, the three passengers joyously took their seats on board, with wrappers bearing the arms of the château. Grégoire was at the tiller and the valet at the ropes. The prow was directed toward the mainland, which ought to be reached in an hour or an hour and a quarter.

"If you have not breeze enough to come back," cried the admiral—"you are listening to me, Roland?—you'll ask the parson to take a hand at the oars. He can do it."

"As for wind," said Grégoire, "we'll have more than enough."

When Monsieur de Kerguel had waved his last *au revoir*, he entered the house to get ready his correspondence, which was behindhand, and with which the vicar of Larmor would be intrusted on his return.

He was still hanging over his desk with prolonged attention when Madame de Prébois called him excitedly from outside.

"I am very much alarmed," she said. "Look there, if you please, what is going on down there."

Monsieur de Kerguel hastened to comply with this request, and in spite of his experience in maritime phenomena, he was struck with the unexpected disturbance which the elements had undergone.

A squall was rising in the distance where the river of Auray flows into the sea; one of those swollen and black bladders which suddenly are detached from the surface of the sky and discharge upon the sea their formidable contents of rain, lightning, and wind.

"It will soon pass," Monsieur de Kerguel remarked, with a feigned indifference. "Besides, they ought to have arrived there."

"Yes, but the return?"

He walked, with long steps and still firm legs, followed by Madame de Prébois, to a point of the cliff which faces the shore at Larmor; the latter had already been overtaken by the fog.

"There they are!" cried the admiral, with more anxiety than pleasure. His old hawk-like eye had perceived in the distance a gleam, a last ray of the flying sun which, cutting through the mist, rested for a second, scarcely a second, on the small sail of a slender mast.

He looked at his watch, then he grumbled:

"They are behind time; they will have to take account of the tide."

"Hey! what! There's something wrong, then?" asked the grandmother, who, all out of breath, had in her turn climbed up near her daughter and was rolling her eyes wildly white in her panting obesity.

Monsieur de Kerguel made no answer.

Was it not better for him to keep silence about the effect of these masses of water pumped during the flood tide into the bays and into the rivers far



inland, which now, at the beginning of the ebb tide, commenced to rush out of their reservoirs, pouring from all sides at once and streaming pell-mell toward the *embouchure* of the Morbihan, dashing together wherever they crossed in the numberless channels between so many islands? What good was it confessing that the crew perhaps was not numerous enough to cope with the consequences of this state of the sea?

All at once a hail-storm engirt the island with all the fury and all the whizzing of its thousand thongs. The two ladies threw their gowns over their heads, but the old man never stirred, receiving its full force on his bald head, examining the horizon, that shrank up moment by moment where the white crest of the waves and the roar of their breaking spoke a stern language to his ears, which knew so well how to interpret it, and to his eyes, which had learnt to read therein so much.

"What will become of them? Good heaven! what will become of them?" groaned Madame de Prébois.

"Oh, our poor child, our dear boy—God preserve him!" replied the grandmother.

The admiral saw the tears, the great tears as in days of old, streaming over that broad face which had been once so beautiful, but which for many a year could no longer display to him anything but expressions of quietude or dull fits of anger.

"Oh!" they all exclaimed together.

Through a rent in the cloud they saw the cutter

leaping cheerily and readily beneath the lash of the storm. During some minutes which checked their respiration, they could still behold its bow rising and the stern rolling as it fought its way beneath the foam of the spray in this terrible concert of the neighing winds.

After this the boat was enveloped with a new fog which spread itself slowly like a bag of soot over the dirty sea.

The lips of Madame de Prébois, close pressed and silent, were bleeding beneath her teeth.

"They will soon be out of that," said the trembling voice of Monsieur de Kerguel; "the boat is a right good boat. Christ! Did you see it?"

"My dear sir," Madame de Prébois remarked roughly, "without your two gadabouts my son would have remained quietly here."

The admiral trembled at the tone of these words, which made something sharper than all the orchestra of the hurricane whistle in the air. He began to understand the extent of what Madame de Prébois must know, and against what and by what right and in what unavowable title she was protesting. He felt, nevertheless, all that she was capable of saying, and what in spite of all conventionalities she might have the madness to trample on in the tragic simplicity of this supreme moment. But in the midst of this atmosphere of shipwreck, what he at once conceived to be the most poignant horror was the possible shipwreck of his sentimental and tacking respectability.

Absorbed in her fears, Madame Sorlin sobbed out: "What need was there for poor, dear little Roland being there?"

And a gleam of regret passed over her sad countenance. Ah! if the peril of her grandson had not forbidden her to wait philosophically for the end of the work with which Providence was occupied; ah! if it had been Madame Hobbins who was all alone down there in the bosom of the tempest—yes, all alone, or even with her daughter—for the hatred of the old lady, ordinarily moderated by the rules of education and as inactive as is the case among people restrained by a certain rank—this hatred, to-day hungry with all the agony of despair, might perhaps have longed, like the Minotaur in all its innocence of its monster nature, to devour the body of the girl.

The women praying, the admiral erect, arms crossed in the attitude in which he had often commanded his men and borne the fury of the elements, were listening, without ever detecting anything, to the voice which breathed from the depths of the sea; that strange unbroken lamentation which one fancies may be that of departed souls and which so many dead lips would supernaturally utter.

Then a change in the wind again swept away the mist and opened the panorama. In the middle of the expanse the cutter was there—yes, there, certainly there, safe and well, more frisky than ever, almost all her sails reefed and coming on rapidly under a few feet of canvas.

"Ah, there it is!" said the admiral to his companions, who dared not yet believe in their good fortune. "The dangerous currents have been passed and in ten minutes they will be here."

In truth, less than a quarter of an hour sufficed for the passengers to be able to leap ashore, dripping as if they had come out of a bath, laughing at finding themselves out of the business, laughing at having been so soaked, laughing at everything.

Even the distressed countenances with which they were received had no power to change the high spirits of Roland and Agnes, who were otherwise too occupied in teasing each other about the torrents of rain and sea-water which were trickling down them. Each of them had a youthful and healthy longing to repeat in chorus all the impressions with which their brains had just been saturated.

"Well, my child," cried Madame de Prébois, "I will guarantee that you are done with these charming boating parties!"

"O madame!" exclaimed Agnes. "What a pity that you were so alarmed! I assure you I never had a moment's fear. One feels that the sea is strong, but not cruel."

"All right, my little dear: You may begin again whenever you like, but without Roland; that I'll answer for."

"The young lady is no coward; it is only justice to say that," the priest declared as he was wringing the water from his fingers.

He was a man about forty, with an expressive face and a clodhopper's limbs; one of those types of the country parson in which their devotion to the cares of religion has roughened only the nobler part. He had a large nose cut off as if with a hatchet, a thin mouth cut with a knife, hair dark and stiff as horse-hair, brilliant eyes that projected a little and had a comic expression, like glass eyes; in fact, he had everything which could make him resemble those idols whose heads barbarous tribes carve out to place on a scarcely squared trunk.

"They will dry your cassock for you," observed Monsieur de Kerguel. "I'll lend you a frock-coat for lunch."

"But my mass—I cannot say mass in a coat!"

The admiral looked inquiringly at Madame de Prébois.

"It is already so late," she said with all the candid unction of prompt ingratitude. "During the last hour my mother and I have prayed God so much that He is quite convinced that we do not forget Him."

"Besides," added Grandmamma Sorlin, "madame and her daughter are Protestants."

The abbé made a bow. The American, with her habitual discretion, with her ever-present tact, had said or done nothing which could call the slightest attention to her return or even provoke a notice of it. She scented in the air of the island some special perturbation of which she was the object, an unpromising one for the continuance of her

relations, a bitterness in regard to her, still slight indeed, but which she would not allow to increase in the actual temper of Madame de Prébois. She was only looking for a satisfactory pretext to quit Ys with politeness as soon as possible.

During the course of the afternoon, the fury of the weather having not yet been allayed, the serious members of the society entertained themselves in the salon, while Agnes and Roland, standing in the anteroom at the entrance to a flight of steps and already with their wraps on, were waiting, with the purpose of going out, for the precise minute when the last drop of a shower, which was clear but deceptive, should have fallen.

The priest, at the suggestion of Madame de Prébois, was just then engaged in expatiating on the matrimonial customs of his flock, and he spoke about them with that species of optimism and with that ignorance of terrestrial evil that the inhabitants of every district profess in reference to all the defects of their soil, whether they be fevers or vices, miasmas infecting the soul or the body.

During this, some hardly human cries were heard near the house, and immediately, before the windows of the ground-floor, the keeper Grégoire, his long hair streaming in the wind and his feet without his wooden shoes, was seen to pass in a mad chase, and close at his heels his wife, howling like a wild beast and brandishing a sickle with a murderous pantomime, which at all events had some human look about it.

The abbé rushed to the fury and seized her by the waist, but he could not make her be silent; and in her inarticulate cries she continued to try and rouse for the chase all the masters and servants in the place.

"What is the matter? What is she crying about?" repeated Madame de Prébois.

In order to reduce her to silence the priest shook her and apostrophized her with those hoarse growls which constitute their language.

The keeper's wife, amid the disorder of her struggles and her cries, succeeded at length in indicating, in turn, Madame Hobbinson, then the road that Grégoire had taken, and then the direction of the farm.

Monsieur de Kerguel, who understood Breton, tried to stifle the affair.

"Oh, it's nothing—another of their stupid household quarrels."

"But what is it?" Madame de Prébois insisted. "Tell us, Monsieur l'Abbé."

"Saving your presence, madame, she says she has caught her husband about to talk nonsense to this lady's maid."

And lifting his hand over the maddened wife with a gesture more appropriate for a box on the ear than an absolution—

"In the name of all that's bad, you don't want to make me swear! Won't you shut up, you donkey?"

Even after this final pacification the scene con-

tinued to impart a new chill to the temperature of the company.

Madame Hobbins made haste to take on herself all the blame for the bad conduct of Mariette, just as she had already taken the responsibility of the storm on her elastic and slender shoulders. Without longer delay, she announced her determination to depart as soon as it was calm, making her excuses to the admiral, praising everybody's kindness; humble as a fault and touching as innocence—in one word, she was unattackable.

When the admiral returned into the drawing-room, which was now deserted, his eyes were red and his brow could not smooth out its wrinkles. He raised the portière, and taking refuge in a balcony isolated by it, he cooled his brow by leaning it against one of the panes of glass, through which he could observe the assault which the waves were making on his domain.

He very soon overheard the voices of Madame Sorlin and of Madame de Prébois, who were in the room without suspicion of his proximity.

"Look here," growled the daughter: "that idiot of a Roland is complaining that he wants to go if that confounded little wench goes. Good God! what fools boys are at that age."

The admiral recognized with stupor his reflection as it appeared in a dull mirror, where his old visage had the infantile grimace, the toothless pout of a spoiled child from which you take a toy.

At the same time Madame Sorlin resumed, in a



low tone, confidentially and unguardedly, as when one talks to one's self:

"Don't you think, my daughter, that growing old makes men so stupid that one asks one's self if it wouldn't be better to see them dead?"

Monsieur de Kerguel quivered under the shock of the strength of passion which he could well divine behind this dismal confession.

At the instant a corner of the cliff which had a long time been sapped by the waves fell with an appalling crash.

"O Lord!" said the old lady.

It was the sea, which, enamoured of the shore, was in its turn testifying to it the climax of its love by following the fashion of living creatures, throwing itself to it and tearing away a strip; and provided that it enveloped with an eternal embrace the object of its love, the sea had no doubts about effecting its destruction.





## V.

THE garden party of the Balbenthals, after all its preliminary vicissitudes, had nearly at the last moment been thrown off the track by a sort of quarrel that Albert Mésigny got up, almost seriously, with his wife.

Yet the effort which the owners of the château had made in appropriating to the exigencies of this fashionable *fête* their magnificent park in the finest district of Bois le Roi was worthy of all respect.

The seat of the *tableaux vivants*, to be interpreted by the usual guests of Tournezy, was at the end of an enormous lawn reserved for spectators, on the margin of a grove, beyond which, as the background of the setting, could be seen fountains springing in rainbow hues, and the great pond bordered with willows and the labyrinth of yew-trees. The ingenious curtains of foliage, some movable, some fixed, according to requirements, masked the scene, Jonzac's orchestra, and the rustic boxes in which the personages of the performance had to dress.

Hundreds of cane chairs or chairs of gilded wood were heaped up in the orangery. The principal

buffet was placed in the hall of the château and, in addition, the dairy was arranged for five-o'clock teas, like a little Trianon. Cakes and Spanish wines were served at the door of the riding school, which was draped, valanced, and decked for a retiring-room.

The continuance of fine weather had permitted the issue of invitations a week in advance, for the second of September, a date closely following the opening of the hunting season, that had filled with guests the historic or modern mansions of the neighborhood.

They were sure of having the Eliasaph, the Dammarie-les-Lys, the Saint Thibault, the Saint Mesme, the Veilchenfelds of Chevry-en-Sereine, the Kerzenscheins of Chapelle-la-Reine, the Villévêques, the General de Montparnoy and his wife and children and sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, the Oberblaesers of Grande Paroisse, several officers of the Thirty-second Chasseurs and the Artillery School, the Marquise de Nauregard, the Count, Countess, Viscount, and Baron Bourgeois, the Amramsohns of Croix-en-Brie, etc., etc.

Monsieur de Prébois had sent excuses for himself and wife, on the plea that he was about to join her in the Morbihan.

On the other hand, Madame Hobbins had promised to come with her daughter from Paris, to which they had just returned.

Now, some days before the *fête*, at the end of one of the rehearsals—which had passed off fairly,

although people reproached Madame Mésigny, behind her back, of not showing this year her usual complacency, and that Des Frasses seemed a spoony Polyphemus—just at the close of the *matinée*, Albert Mésigny refused to dine with the Balbenthals, in spite of the tacit understanding in this respect whenever the troupe was summoned. To his wife's astonishment, he pleaded the necessity of going to receive, at his own house, some guests expected at half-past twelve, and asked for the dog-cart in which Clotilde and he had arrived from Fontainebleau.

Albert took leave of the Balbenthals with scant politeness, and pretended to have altogether forgotten to do so with regard to Trept and Des Frasses, with whom his wife, perplexed, and as if to make amends, shook hands with marked cordiality.

Whilst the carriage, leaning over, rolled and jolted under the covered way of Charme Brule, the wheels going in and out of the hardened and ancient ruts of the road, the hired horse continually snorting in the cloud of insects which his chest brushed from the high grass, Albert was silent, apparently devoting himself to gathering here and there, with the thong of his whip, some bud at the tip of a branch. He turned away, in the opposite direction to which his wife was sitting, his small head, inexpressive and finely modelled, which resembled on a large scale, but still curious and pretty, the head of a marmoset, with

flat cheeks, entirely covered with very fine hairs, a clean-cut nose not very prominent, an upper lip rather developed and always of a rose color by its daily contact with the rasping of the razor. But the general effect was that of a marmoset, whose imagination was not very active, with dull eyes, with expressionless features and slow movement.

"Would you kindly explain to me what has come over you?" at length Clotilde decided to ask.

Without turning round, Albert seemed by the movement of his chest and lips as if about to answer, but he still kept silence. A hill having brought the equipage to a walk in the shade of the branches, Mésigny placed the reins between his knees, removed his coarse straw hat with one hand, whilst with the other he gently tapped on his sleek smooth hair, like a man who is not cogitating, but shows well enough—thank God—that he is not cogitating, and therefore it will be unnecessary to pretend afterward that it was he who began it.

"I have a horror," continued Clotilde, "of such manners. Try to answer and to put on another face——"

"Not so much vivacity, if you please," he said, with the gravity and urbanity of those determined disputants who resolve every time not to get in such a rage as the last time. "It is very simple. A dinner like a *table d'hôte* dinner kills me. I would much rather have taken you out to enjoy your society all to myself. Is it not my right?"

"I thank you for the gracious thought. Oh, yes, it is your right! But you ought to be a little more pleasant to me, for, if not, I should vastly have preferred to remain yonder."

"Many thanks! So that I might continue to play the part of an idiot! That will do, my little one."

"The part of an idiot! Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"I beg you will be polite, if you please. I don't tell you that you are taking leave of your senses; therefore, do not say that I am. I have had enough—that will do."

"Enough of what?" cried Clotilde, furious. "Look, there's a rabbit," she pointed out, as a little white tuft of fur was seen flitting about in the furze. "Did you see it?" she said, with the air of satisfaction that we feel at having successfully pointed out with the finger something abnormal, fugitive, and already gone.

Albert shook his frame with all the contempt that a preoccupied man ought, he thought, to show toward a rabbit, and looked sternly at his wife.

"Do you suppose that I did not see the way those fellows behaved to you? Why, you must take me for an imbecile."

It was now Clotilde's turn to affect contempt by turning to the left toward the view which the dark and indifferent depths of the forest presented. Now that she thoroughly understood what it was

all about, she felt that it was more than ever necessary for her to play the part of one dumfounded ; for a moment she hesitated whether she should undertake this effort. But what was the use of lying? What had she to risk, after all? Idleness prevailed and inspired her to sulk, which is a relative rest.

For that matter, this mistake in tactics passed unperceived by the husband, whose voice began to tremble slightly.

"Yes," he continued, "everything has its limits, even a flirtation; and the time comes that by continual flirting an honest woman no longer seems to me to be an honest woman."

Clotilde gave a quick start and with her mouth firmly set in defiance,

"Is that meant for me?"

"You bother me!" replied Albert, with some remains of respect, by a kind of affectionate consideration, which this reply, evasive as it was, suggested. He recalled to mind the recent movements in which the transformation of his wife into the nymph Galatea had struck him with all the coarseness of its *déshabillé*, especially when the representation of a shared love dream had made Clotilde lie down by the side of the shepherd Acis, otherwise Monsieur Trept, whose arms were half naked.

"Listen, my dear," he said, in a quick tone; "the determination I have come to will put you in a fury. I don't care! You shall not take part in

these *tableaux vivants* !” he concluded, in a slower tone, having vaguely seen, when he had got half way through the sentence, that the expression of his will would be fruitless, and that Clotilde foresaw that it would be so ; but he threw out words in this useless way simply because he often did not know his own thoughts clearly except by formulating them and hearing himself utter them.

“ So be it,” said Clotilde. “ I will write to Madame Balbenthal, telling her that you are sick, and that neither of us can go.”

“ That is how you exaggerate ! I don’t demand that you should not go. We can go there like any one else, without its being indispensable that you should catch Monsieur Trept’s——”

This name made Clotilde smile in spite of herself, without her being able to define the reason. And she allowed herself to remain under the influence of this intimate gayety instead of taking the trouble to demonstrate to her husband that his pretended combination was both vulgar and stupid.

“ No !” he exclaimed, “ I wish you had a looking-glass here so that you could see yourself. You just look like a flirt when you draw up your mouth as if you had a bowl of milk and didn’t want to lose a drop ; you know well, when your Trept or your Des Frasses— By the bye, Des Frasses no longer kisses your hand—that’s a pity. I was greatly flattered to see him shut his eyes, as if you had just offered him the patin. Have you quarrelled ?”



"You are spiteful," murmured Clotilde, becoming at once serious. "I shall not much longer be able to bear being your pincushion."

"Well, I also am heartily sick of all these bodyguards that you have surrounded yourself with, who scarcely say 'good-day' to me; who doubtless do not think me worthy of their conversation, and for whom it is evident I am a negligible quantity."

In these words Albert had, perhaps, thoroughly exposed the foundation of his trouble. And even he was not quite sure whether he was more aggrieved in his jealousy or his pride. At any rate, he never for a moment contemplated, in perspective even, any treason on the part of his wife. Not that he was an optimist with regard to human virtues, nor those of Clotilde in particular, whom he knew to be pretty, giddy, and much sought after; on the contrary, no one was more convinced than Mésigny himself of the possibility of his incurring conjugal disgrace. But the fear of this eventuality no more haunted his young mind than the fear of dying, of which, however, he was assured in quite another way. To be deceived, to die—these were events far off for him, things which do not happen like that, which do not take place in life all of a sudden, without, so to speak, official warning, without its having been understood or hinted at, without one's having had time to take steps. According to his rule, sudden deaths should only have been invented for dogs.

Clotilde had taken time to reflect, after which, disjoining the cases, she retained but one.

"A few moments ago, for instance," she began, "Monsieur Trept was very polite toward you, just before we left. It was you who did not answer him when he asked you if you had not a cane with you when you came. Certainly he said to you, 'I thought you had a cane.' You don't listen to what is said to you, and then you say that people don't speak to you. You are really susceptible!"

"That's good! You quote Trept! You are not lucky in your choice. It is a fact that Trept is of the two the less well bred, and I have more fault to find with him than with the other. It is he of your two——"

"If you please—of my two! In the first place, that means nothing. I have neither two, nor one, nor anybody. I do not understand."

"You do not understand that it is monstrous that Monsieur des Frasses or Monsieur Trept should behave in public as the intimate friend of the wife, and yet remain almost a stranger toward the husband!"

"They are your friends as well as mine," Clotilde replied, in such bad faith that it made her lower her voice. "You have told me so a hundred times," she resumed with energy, "when you came home from the club at your four o'clock in the morning hours!"

"Oh, my four o'clock in the morning hours!"

"You don't like it mentioned, perhaps. Any

way, as if you thought that would soften me, frequently you told me that you had been playing cards with Monsieur Trept."

"Monsieur Trept! Monsieur Trept! You annoy me, confound it! with your constantly having the name of your Monsieur Trept in your mouth."

"Why, it is you who spoke to me the first about these *tableaux vivants*."

"Good reason why, I presume. It puts me in an absurd situation, I tell you again, when a whole party has been invited to behold you lying alongside of him, on a bed of moss. The Balbenthals will have more than three hundred people there!"

"What nonsense! Is it the lookers-on that worry you? Up to the present, I thought that these ways of carrying on would have annoyed you far more if they were done in secret."

At the corner of the Avenue Valvins, Albert had to stop the dog-cart in order to avoid colliding with a cavalcade of five or six officers who issued from an oblique and tree covered alley, and whose voices had reached the married couple.

Those whom the dog-cart was waiting to let pass hastened forward, out of politeness; but as they passed in silence, with only the loud ring of the horses' shoes, the husband saw all these faces, so different and so differently occupied with their horses, look solely toward Clotilde, a look of rude homage, as if she alone were perched in the carriage. This incident caused a change in Albert's ideas, or rather enlarged their scope. He was

obliged, nevertheless, to admit in the end that he should never be anything else than the shadow while he was by his wife's side, in the estimation of men. And now returning good-humor in Clotilde's face excited an appetite in her husband to nourish peace for the present, to eat day by day, if needs be, the marriage settlement of their friendship, their common stock of good nature. And gayly, as in the days when Albert had squandered a first inheritance, his disposition still was to live on the capital of fidelity which his wife had brought to him, without any more care as to saving guarantees or illusions in the future.

Nevertheless, with irritated senses, he leant slightly toward Clotilde, giving way to an enervate longing to make her tantalize his heart with another's secret.

"Be frank," he asked her: "which is the warmer in his addresses?"

"Oh, bother!" replied the young woman, shrugging her shoulders several times. Albert, pressing against her more and more, whispered:

"Is it Des Frasses?"

The intonation was so soft, and the intimacy of this marital voice was after all so ingrafted in her, that Clotilde was almost under the impression that she had been speaking to herself. For a moment she gave no answer, trying not to lie to herself inwardly, and perceiving with the intensest anxiety that she was calculating how not to be too quick in denying it out loud. Then with an

expression on her lips that was simply negative, but which soon spread into a smile, the corner of which showed a tacit raillery agreeing perfectly with the intentional playfulness of her long eyelashes and large eyes, which seemed to betray her thoughts and literally to avow:

"Ah, old boy, my poor old boy, you are not in it this time!"

Albert, aroused, cried cunningly:

"Hey? I wasn't deceived, then; you see, it was Trept. What does he say to you? Do tell me, I beg of you. You can't imagine how you will please me. Come, tell me all about it. Clotilde, you will be a darling little pet——"

"What will you, my dear? I don't remember," she hazarded.

"Let us try. Trept pays you compliments—yes, unseemly compliments, no doubt," continued Mésigny, at a gesture from Clotilde indicating that simple compliments were everybody's money and of no value.

"Unseemly?" she asked, ingenuously.

"In a word, he would wish you to believe that he is in love with you; that you ought to love him——"

"Oh, he makes the same kind of protestations to a good many other women. That, my dear, is a duty which all people in society have to put up with."

Albert's brow became again overcast. Between its furrows it was easy to read that he was annoyed

at heart. And Clotilde, sheepish at this proof of how inconsiderate had been her policy, was thinking how to profit in the future by this lesson, and decided mentally that one could never sincerely confide some things to a husband, even when those things were not really sincere—already——

“Does that gentleman ever deign to speak to you about me?” continued Mésigny. “Ah! what does he say about me?”

“You will admit,” said Clotilde, after having reflected for a few seconds, “that I would not tolerate any remarks about you which were not—well, if you must know the truth, Monsieur Trept is convinced that I am madly in love with you.”

“You don’t say! And why?”

“Because—because he recognizes that you are of a very fine type—of a type very taking—quite the thing.”

“I quite the thing! That’s pretty good. What have I got about me so taking—quite the thing?”

“Oh, how rough you are, you bear!” protested Clotilde, recoiling, while a deep blush of annoyance spread over her face.

Albert had just kissed her, there on the dog-cart which he now stopped in front of their country cottage in the little, narrow, sunlit street, which was at this hour of noon luckily almost deserted.

. . . . .

When under the azure *velum* the fashionable hubbub of a large and deep auditorium, impatient

at length to see something, subsided to listen to the preludes of the orchestra, under the direction of Jonzac, an extreme emotion seized Madame Mésigny, whose self-possession on the stage, however, was well known. But this time she knew that success would not depend upon her talent as a reciter, as the fine exponent of airs where the ingenuity of the action or the aid of a witty play covers everything; her only *rôle* was to succeed by her physical value, to appear admirably formed, superb, even ideal, and that by no other means than manifesting the material authority of her beauty. There reigned, too, in Clotilde's whole being the feeling that she had to accomplish not an ordinary rite for earthly rejoicings, but the supreme function of which her organism was capable, where everything had to be in tension, to be piquant, to glisten and whirl. It was an internal paroxysm to which no gesture nor word could lend force or breadth; and the forms of her generous and fresh body, under their impatience of ostentation, seemed to become still more perfect in this new-born plasticity.

The curtain of leaves opened suddenly, and a buzz of approbation immediately went through the audience, among which many raised themselves discreetly, in zigzag, a little higher, from their seats. The nymph was saluted; she stood leaning against the moss of an artificial rock, over which a large magnolia stretched out the weight of its flowers.

In her splendor of whiteness she was indeed the nymph whom tradition had called Milky White. The hair parted on the forehead and gathered at the back, by a silvery enribboning of her diadem, in tresses which covered the top of the ears, her arms bare, the throat exposed, as was permitted by her character of statue and by her temperament, indulgent to the impudence of eyes, if fierce against that of the hands—Clotilde was breathing imperceptibly under the milk-like cambric of a tunic which, open on the bias, only suspended its fall at the point of exposing the entire left side. Sandals, glistening like snow, were laced over tights almost colorless and visible to the knee. And through the darkness of the leaves the gold, which a beaming sun poured drop by drop on the stage, paled at contact with the nymph, and melted in the cream of her face and the milk of her rounded shoulders. With a haughty expression of face the daughter of the gods deigned only to lower the disdain of her eyes and the disgust of her lips toward Polyphemus, who, enveloped in a bear's skin, one knee on the ground, on the other a lyre which his frightened fingers barely touched, his eyes supplicating, his beseeching mouth visible through his strong beard, personified the distress of persistent and unrequited love. In the first dizziness which follows the fixing of the pupils, Clotilde saw reproduced before her once more the whole episode of that mad declaration to the very verge of which Des Frasses had ventured. Since



then she had never been so looked at as she was being looked at now.

To-day it was not in the solitude, or in the fearfulness of a *tête-à-tête* that she saw mounting toward her the passionate confession of her adorer; it was in broad daylight, in the security of what is allowed, amid the applause of society. Nature was taking part in the ceremony in shedding around the aroma of its fields and the canticle of its bees. To this, the accompaniment of music, touching and sensual, articulated the wail of all inarticulable and unimaginable arguments.

The figure of the young woman involuntarily expanded, softened, changed from the required attitude; thanks, perhaps, to the fatigue of keeping a pose that seemed eternal, and perhaps also from the fact that, in her own life, a conventional attitude, such as she had here undertaken, had weighed heavily upon her in anticipation. Never before had propriety allowed her to cross her visual glances, so resolutely, so tenaciously, so ceaselessly, with those of a young man as she had done in the middle of that sculptural intrigue, immovable and silent. And under a galvanism of her heart, under the hypnotism of an inevitable look, at the end of that stiffening of her nerves, in which she felt approaching a spasm of abnormal lassitude, consummating, in order to nourish her last strength, all the will with which the internal fire caused her face to tremble and her muscles to quiver, her limbs to crack, Clotilde comprehended for the first

time the natural instinct of love agitating her very vitals.

Suddenly, at the moment that the curtain was closing, the spectators were able to see her quickly raise her hand to her bosom, uttering a piercing shriek.

The voice of Des Frasses immediately betrayed the event to the near-by audience through the screen of foliage.

"A wasp, is it not?" cried he. "Oh, you have been badly stung. We must get some alkali—at once!"

And from row to row of chairs a chaotic noise of people getting up and stretching their legs repeated, without the least regard to the selection being played—

"It is a wasp——"

"Is it a wasp?"

"Yes, a wasp!"

"The devil—a wasp!"

And this little word, with its aggressive and sonorous sound, flew from mouth to mouth, under the vast tent reflecting a cloudless sky, buzzing like a swarm of bees and carrying hither and thither a little shudder of horror at detested stings into that crowd of faithful votaries of enjoyment, in the temple temporarily prepared for wealthy gayety and healthy frivolity.

During the *entr'actes* some of the guests, following the tendency always inherent in the very fact of being spectators, endeavored hypocritically to

slip through toward the mysterious harem of the wings and crowded round the entrance to the cottage, which, placed in the middle of the arbor, sheltered the toilettes of the artists under its charming rurality.

"Has it swollen much?" they asked, one of the other.

"Camphorated *eau-de-vie* application——"

"Oh, it can't be very serious——"

"No; but for the time being, all the same——"

"I, three years ago, exactly at this time——"

"How prettily arranged is this little corner, is it not?"

Albert Mésigny, with an important air, before the rustic boudoir of his wife, received each sympathizing question with almost contradictory replies.

"It is nothing—it is almost gone—it won't be much—it is past—yes, certainly it can be seen, but it will not mark—oh, just at first those stupid little things—it is very annoying," he repeated, winding up by taking as witnesses a lot of unknown heads which, half-turned already, gave their consent, nodding indifferently, while curly-haired youths with young girls stuck themselves under the nose of the husband of the victim, staring at him with fixed gravity, without even a notion of the proper expression to be assumed. At length Madame Balbenthal, leaving Clotilde, reappeared, her fan open and feverish in one hand, in the other her handkerchief and the corner of her skirt, which she held up to descend the steps while they closed the door

of the box behind her. Her Oriental face, with its color of old-gold, generally as impassible as the luxury in which it was accustomed to reflect itself, betrayed that warmth of emotion, that powerful trouble of responsibility which overtakes the masters of a house not because the thing happened, but because it happened there.

"What an alarm!" she said. "Ah, Monsieur Mésigny, how courageous your wife is! The little dear insists that the spectacle should proceed at once. I have left her with the dresser——"

Albert offered her his arm to reconduct her to her place, and both, on their way, began once more to distribute the "Oh, it is nothing"s, which are passed on from one to another like a pass-word, vanishing with the last grin of commiseration. Then Monsieur Balbenthal hurried to inform Monsieur Jonzac that the spectacle was about to go on. He found the composer in the centre of his orchestra, from which he had not moved, rolling the spiteful eyes of starving pride, biting his hollow cheeks, which were hungry for all the praise that the audience had, in the pre-occupation of the accident, forgotten to bestow.

"Ah, dear maestro! Did you see that *contre-temps*? You at all events have had a tremendous success! But you can understand that Goth of an insect! You know, of course—that cursed wasp?"

"Well, and what of it? A wasp?" replied Jonzac, like a man to whom life is like a bagful of asps and vipers, and whose whole bearing said

plainly, "Do I complain? Do I faint? Not I!" And having run his fingers through his gypsy hair in a soothing caress, affecting (under his swallow-tail coat, which he had thought proper to put on) a complacent air of the highest of high life, he tapped his desk to warn his musicians to hold themselves in readiness.

As soon as Madame Mésigny came on the scene again, gracefully stretched out by the side of the shepherd Acis on the anfractuosity of their rock, a round of applause burst forth, sympathetic and unanimous. Then this enthusiasm, having scarcely subsided, again burst forth, again and again and again.

"Bravo! bravo! bravo!" they cried between the clapping of hands. It was the avenging homage of so much assembled courtesy and the united protest of humanity which enjoys itself against the little crushed wasp, against the breach of etiquette committed by a tiresome destiny.

Whereupon the actors effected a change which was arranged to perfection. Trept and Clotilde raised themselves suddenly on their elbows as they perceived the brow of Polyphemus, who, on a projection of the rock, was leaning toward the pair.

All the fury of jealous and provoked passion at this moment bellowed in the orchestra. But the face of Des Frasses, which, in his position, the audience could not very well distinguish, was one of love-stricken woe and not of Cyclopean rancor. Why did Clotilde imagine to herself that two tears

were about to fall from his eyes? With what feeling of audacity, quickly dispelled, would she have liked to have gathered those tears in her bosom, on which the slight wound, now rosy under the rice powder, seemed to have been made by the smallest of Love's darts, by one of those light arrows which had only had a flirtation for a quiver and the skin for a target!

In a word, the third tableau was Madame Mésigny's greatest triumph. Draped in purple, drawing up her figure, throwing her head back, she stood erect before a golden shell drawn by two dolphins under the guidance of Lili Balbenthal—that is to say, Cupid. From a paper which from time to time Monsieur Balbenthal read aloud, the argument of the programme was thus proclaimed:

“Galatea's eyes are looking toward heaven, the home of noble inclinations, and are thus protesting, by an aspiration toward the infinite, against the malice of the god who entices her to earthly pleasures, and whom she is attempting to restrain by pressing one hand on the reins.”

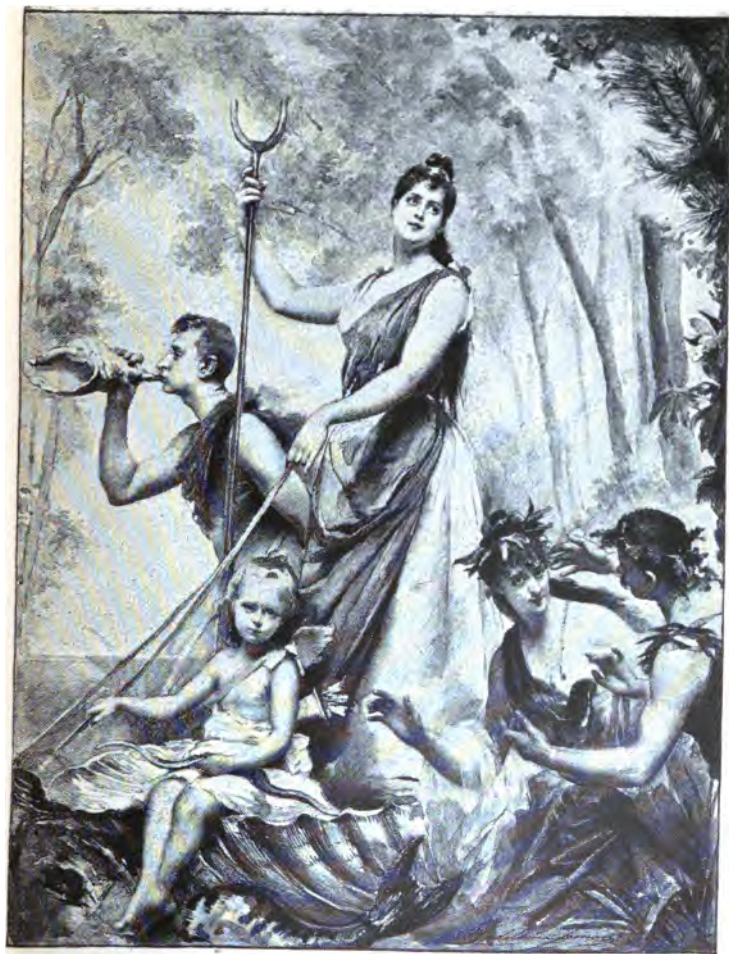
But Clotilde's beauty was bound to divide the honors of the apotheosis with the perverse charm of Madame Nully-Lévrier. She, covered with seaweeds, as a verdant-robed Nereid enveloped by the waves of sea-green muslin, her eyes glaucous and sparkling amid her celebrated emerald jewels, with bare arms tinted in their suppleness with the shade of so many green reflections, was battling on the right of the group, with more coquetry than earnest-

ness, against the embraces of a formidable Triton (Monsieur du Tarn, lieutenant of hussars).

To the left, Maurice Balbenthal, a young sea-god astride a pasteboard hippocampus, tried to obtain an ovation for the comical part by blowing a horn of shells and by puffing his cheeks out so extravagantly that, for the first time in his life, his long nose, projecting between them, seemed in harmony with the rest of his features.

Thus terminated the spectacle, in a glory of applause, the whole company already standing and hastening to regain, with their liberty of action, their choice of shorter and more voluntary attractions. Here and there people exchanged compliments as to the great pleasure which had been provided, and were so much the more enthusiastic because the pleasure was now ended and because each one, recovering his individual importance, thought it only proper to take to himself a satisfactory share in this theatrical success by conversing about it.

It was about four o'clock, and the beauty of the weather made this moment the most exquisite of the day. While the greater part of the guests turned to the great hall of the château with a twittering of voices, with the dainty lounging tread of fashion out-of-doors, other groups, like coteries, scattered themselves in the alleys of the park. Clear-cut *silhouettes* strayed in the distance, in the background of clumps of flowers, and spacious masses of foliage; gleaming robes and bright uni-







forms stood here or there and moved about under the hospitable straw-roofed porches where tables were placed.

As soon as Madame Mésigny, in her ordinary attire, opened the door of her dressing-room she perceived Trept, who, on the threshold of his, was arranging a bunch of corn-flowers in the button-hole of his jacket.

"I am quite cramped," she cried. "Shall we take a little run at the double-quick?"

"Hey!" exclaimed Polyphemus through a partition. "Wait for me, if you please. My wig has stained my neck!"

A burst of laughter answered him, and Clotilde led Trept away, slowly and noiselessly, with a longing more imperious than she had ever felt before to play a trick on Des Frasses, through that strange compensatory desire of feminine equity that leads a woman to inflict torture on the man whom she is certain that she can, if she likes, render happy.

The pair in their hasty flight soon arrived at the banks of the long rectangular lake. In that still, deserted spot, the black swans, rigid and quaintly expectant on the calm surface of the waves that reflected their pink bills, swam after the visitors.

"All the same," said Trept, cavalierly, "it was jolly to be side by side with you on the moss a little while ago. By Jove! I behaved like a little saint. Was not my reserve astonishing? I was indeed a fool. I should have crowded up nearer

to you before the curtain rose—just when you could not draw back or even stir.”

“A pretty arrangement it would have been for me! Did you not remark how jealous my husband is of you? The other morning I believed he would have forbidden me to play ‘Galatea’ with you to-day. A regular fit of anger——”

“Impossible! But then he ought to be jealous of Des Frasses, too.”

“Much less.”

“How can that be?” asked Trept, credulous and excited.

“I do not know,” was the hypocritical reply.

As she accepted his assistance to cross a little stream, Trept took advantage of the opportunity to hold her hand in his.

“Will you let it go?” she cried, struggling. “You are provoking. Any one can see us through these trees. Besides, there are promenaders everywhere.”

“So,” replied Trept, persisting in retaining his prize, “it is only because there are people about. If we were better hidden, invisible—what then?”

“My friend, I shall be really angry. What pleasure can it be to you to squeeze my hand?”

“Tut! tut! If you did not guess that it gave me a keen sense of pleasure, your naughty little heart would not feel the need of depriving me of it.”

By a struggle of annoyance Clotilde succeeded at length in getting free, and as she wished not to

compromise further her taste for anodyne flirtations with Trept, she at once asked him, with a smile that put their relations on the old footing where they could remain confidential and trifling—

“Just for once I should like to know the opinion, the complete opinion, you have of me. What sort of woman do you think me to be? Now—without flattery.”

Trept knew too well the tone to take in order to make those little ears listen to coarse proposals; he knew the license that many women permit when such proposals are presented as the result of prolonged thought about themselves, and thus imbibe the perfume of an homage.

He twisted his stiff mustaches, that had the polish and gleam of copper wire, and, without hesitation, in a friendly tone, with an air of indulgent authority, as one master of the subject :

“I would wager my head you have a lover.”

The emotion which made Clotilde palpitate was neither that of anger nor of shame. She would have said that a rude yet assuaging hand had been laid on the deepest folds of her consciousness and allayed its irritation. She gave a cry of stupefaction, as if, in the still unexplored meanderings of her brain, a flight of strange, flickering ideas had suddenly risen up at the sound of these bold words.

“What makes you suppose that?” she asked, after a pause, her eyes on the ground, her mouth quivering, with an involuntary desire to laugh, her head ~~shaking~~ in soft negation.

Trept hastened to furnish all the justification he could think of for his remarks; such as the visible indifference of Madame Mésigny for her husband, her constant good-humor, which, in the case of a woman so noble in soul and of such generous instincts, could only arise from a feeling that found its affinity elsewhere.

"So," concluded Trept, "if I have never harassed you with declarations or prayers, it is because, with an artist's scruples, I waited for the apogee of your beauty. I waited for the moment in which I now see you."

Clotilde shrugged her shoulders. She had plucked and was chewing carelessly a blade of grass.

Trept continued in a more insinuating voice:

"You now understand why I must have often seemed awkward, even cold perhaps. It is no fatuousness on my part—do not deny that you possess such provoking grace! I am frank, you see, even cynical. As far as love goes most men—is it not so?—do not want to be the husband. I go still further. I do not want to be the first lover—nor the only lover. It is not the mere woman I love, but the loved woman. Do you comprehend?"

"Yes."

They came to the turn in an avenue of lime-trees, the end of which abutted on the first arcades of the château of Tournezy. A sound of steps and conversation approached them slowly beneath the trees. Trept bent his face forward toward

that of his companion, who turned aside, and on whom he wished to impress the imperious seduction of his strange eyes.

"Oh, what a mistress you would be!" he cried. "I adore her! Let me look at your eyes! I adore you!"

"Here is Madame Hobbinsen," Clotilde broke in, extending her hand to the new-comer.

She would not for the world have exclaimed "Here is Monsieur des Frasses," yet of the two arrivals, he was the one she saw first.

"Why, you have been quite rejuvenated in Brittany," said Madame Mésigny, embracing the American lady. "They say it is superb down there. And Emilienne—tell me about our dear Emilienne," she added, with a tone of familiar and objectless raillery, meant for Madame de Prébois, to which persons of a certain age are exposed when they condescend to comradeship with much younger spirits.

"Why, how can one talk to-day of any one but you? Go and listen up there how they chant your praises! It is deafening! Ask Des Frasses to repeat what we were just saying about you!"

"I have an account to settle with you, Monsieur des Frasses," replied Clotilde. "I must take possession of you."

She calmly led aside the young man, who was exceedingly perplexed by this unexpected initiative and the good fortune of such a *tête-à-tête*, of which he had lost not only the habit, but the hope. She

turned, at a little distance, to Madame Hobbinson and called, laughing with that polite, jerky laughter with which people season everything that they serve when it is heavy of digestion by themselves or others :

"Observe, I leave Monsieur Trept in exchange. Tell him to finish what he was saying to me. *Au revoir !* We cannot hear you !"

She turned at once to Des Frasses, with an ironical voice and an eye provoking and languishing.

"Ah," she said, "what ailed you, a while ago, during the *tableaux vivants* ? How odd you were ! You were so red—one might have thought you were going to cry. Has anything happened to you, my friend ?"

Des Frasses, much moved, coughed and shook himself. Then, to entreat Clotilde not to mock him further, he turned on her the dark, sad, velvety eye of the dying stag.

"Why," exclaimed she, clapping her hands, "here you are beginning again."

"Madame, in heaven's name !"

He made a gesture as if powerless to speak.

"I am tired just now," she said in an indifferent manner—"shall we sit down there ?"

She pressed her lips together, her nostrils quivered, and she marched with the air of a queen, leading him to a bench of sculptured stone, the entablature of a cornice from the ruins of the Tuileries. This retreat was decorously in view, at

the back of a platform of which the half-moon was traced by a concave hedge of trimmed shrubs. In the centre a statue of Diana, with her foot on the plinth, caressing a greyhound, seemed to be running toward the château, whose terrace and swarm of guests were seen through a large gap in the verdure.

They sat down side by side, she square to the front, he sidewise, as frightened, no doubt, as Cinna when he was asked to take his famous seat.

"Do you suppose I am always angry with you?" Clotilde finally ventured to say with a voluptuous feeling of clemency.

"Alas!" he sighed.

"It was very wrong, the liberty you took: you ought never to have offended me!" Then with an impatience of generosity she continued: "Do not be vexed any longer! Now look at me." She took his arm to oblige him to receive the flood of pity that streamed from her eyes. "Well, I promise to pardon you!"

"Oh, blessings for that word! What tortures I have endured since you drove me away—for you did so!"

"Tut! that is all effaced."

She felt a little twinge of pain on touching un-awares the mark of the sting.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Des Frasses; "it pains you?"

He did not insist further, saddened by the thought that she was in pain, but still more resolved to prosecute the affair.



"At least you have not forgotten the confession that escaped me in my transports—my attachment has only strengthened. My love, I love you a thousand times more at present."

"Tut! tut!" she said again.

"If you pardon me without my retracting anything, you permit me to love you?"

"I do not forbid you——"

"And you then? Tell me later, when you deign to do so, will you love me too?"

"It is not impossible. Strive for it—make the attempt, at least."

Des Frasses in his bewildered intoxication had mechanically approached nearer to her. Incapable of discussing it at length and seeking to find out what could have so transformed Clotilde, he was ready to call out "A miracle!" He was not in a state just then to comprehend that, on the contrary, it would have been a miracle if on that afternoon of old times a single ray of love had ripened the desired crop. To-day time had moved on, or had made the mysterious seed sprout, after the normal action of weeks of cloud and weeks of sunshine; the human clay had received the seed and fermented it in its bosom, with the fine rain of long *ennui* and long duties, and now it was bursting under the pressure of the germs and opening under the protracted neighborhood of the sun.

"Now I must go for a little while to Madame Balbenthal's circle," Clotilde exclaimed gayly, having closed up her soul and laying aside their mutual

revery, just as one puts aside a weary task with patient tranquillity after one's daily toil.

"My treasure," Des Frasses prayed, "do not quit me before saying at least when I shall see you again."

"Very soon, my friend."

"When? How? Can we agree to meet in the forest near your house—or further off, if you prefer it?"

"Oh, no! Just think how compromising it would be."

In spite of his insistence, without even any excuse, she replied, "No, no, not now," stricken with fear, yet resolute with that half-courage which will face the peril of the future, but which feels the need of delay to steel itself for the present.

"You can surely wait," she whispered, "for my return to Paris. I shall be there in less than three weeks."

"Three weeks! Three weeks!"

"Be reasonable! Do you not owe me some concession?"

"And how shall I meet you?"

"Where do you wish?"

"Where would you wish?"

Neither of them dared to speak out, for to a certain extent the character of their interview would be determined by the nature of the rendezvous. Between the feeling of their contrary interests and their common desire of an understanding, they both underwent the anxiety of bargaining

with a fear of not offering enough or of risking too much.

"Draw a little further back," whispered Clotilde ; "my husband is coming. In a fortnight from the day after to-morrow, at a quarter to four."

"But where?"

"At St. Peter's in—no, at the Trocadero Museum—oh, perhaps it is one of the closed days! Well, then, let it be in the Arc de Triomphe—will that suit you? Yes, I visited it once; there are only strangers there or working people."

Albert was advancing toward them carrying a scarf to protect Clotilde from the first coolness of the coming evening, with that affectionate prophylactic carefulness by which the most negligent husbands still teach a lesson to the most impassioned of lovers, and which is the result perhaps of a scruple instinctive with those on whom will fall the duty of nursing the patient.

"You are looking a little pale," he said to his wife while covering her shoulders after she had risen.

And as Des Frasses sauntered discreetly a few paces in advance, Mésigny added in an undertone:

"They told me you had gone for a walk with Trept; that would have displeased me."

By these words he meant to show his wife that his jealousy was not stupid nor altogether of a piece; that he knew how to discriminate between a proper and an improper way of paying addresses, between people whose attentions were tol-

erated, although somewhat risky, and those against whom it was absolutely necessary to defend one's self.

For that matter, at the point at which Clotilde had arrived with Des Frasses, she and he had for the future rounded the cape, beyond which the storms of marital suspicions could not blow. In the future, as their relations to each other had been privately established, there was no need of betraying themselves, in their public deportment, by any ambiguous attitude, by any unseasonable by-play. The first step had been taken, after which a husband becomes, logically, infallibly, far more satisfied with his wife, because she behaves much better and ceases to fool with the third party who caused unpleasantness.

"With regard to Des Frasses," interposed Mésigny, "I warn you that, down there, all those ladies want their handsome Polyphemus—for pity's sake, my dear——"

Clotilde smiled charmingly, happy without reserve in that her husband had voluntarily used this amiable expression, and she experienced a vague and humanitarian beatitude at seeing the ice melt a little between these two men and dreaming that their sympathy might blossom.

The three persons, returning to the château, passed Agnes Hobbinson escorted by young Maurice Balbenthal, in whom the sea-god had retired to give place to a would-be *viveur*, a vamped-up dandy, in a wonderfully checked waistcoat.

"Have you not seen your mother?" asked the girl.

On a somewhat indefinite indication from Clotilde the young people continued their investigations.

"They can do what they please," continued Maurice, "but they will never be able to substitute anything for the horse."

Agnes coincided with this assertion, showing by her look of astonishment that she did not see exactly what could be substituted, especially in the way of horse-riding, of which they had been speaking.

"If it would amuse you," hazarded Maurice, "the ponies could be saddled and we could take a turn in the park!"

Agnes thanked him, admitting that it would not amuse her.

The lad, whose legs were rather skinny in his tight-fitting trousers, did his best to keep up with her, looking at her over his shoulder while he walked.

"You have grown," said he. "Just look where you come up to me now. Wait a moment, that we may measure."

"It is not worth while," replied Agnes, who thought to herself that her height ought not to be of any curious or relative interest, except under conditions not then present.

"Why, you wear ear-rings! They are screwed on, are they not? There are no holes. Let me look!"

"Not at all," said Agnes, shaking her neck. "You have no need to look!"

Maurice Balbenthal stared at her, surprised at this sternness, which contrasted with her usual good-nature.

"Oh, very well," he decided rudely, and turning on his heel said, "Good-evening!"

He went back angry, very dignified and resolute in the independence of that age when one feels in one's inmost mind that it serves the other right to be angry; and Agnes proceeded on her way alone, relieved and glad in the innocence of her soul, in that touching simplicity of youth which allows one to breathe more freely after having quarrelled with what has annoyed us and which does not seek for any other resource to clear up the situation..

From a distance Madame Hobbinson had seen her daughter, having in vain endeavored, by signals feebly executed and at intermitting intervals, to attract her attention.

"Bah!" objected Trept. "I know of course what I ought to do, what would be best for me to say. I ought to call on you three or four times a week, speak to you only in a trembling voice, with eyes like a fried haddock. Yes, to be always at your heels, swear to you that I am going mad, that I had never loved before, that it is the first time I know what love is, and that now you have my heart forever."

"Well, that would not be so bad, all that," inter-

rupted the American in a quiver and caressing her supple lips with her tongue.

"Good—and I should be at liberty after that to conduct myself like a vulgar cad. Instead of those well-known tricks, I speak to you frankly, without duplicity or vanity, like one who has well analyzed himself—I present myself as a suitor who wishes neither to cry nor to cause tears to flow, as a sincere and constant friend with whom a woman can share all the inevitable cares, all the possible joys of ordinary life."

Madame Hobbins smiled in an equivocal manner, and with a reassuring and coquettish gesture cut short Trept's explanation.

"Women will always answer that they want love, love, love. By that they mean that you must be devoted to them; that all your thoughts must be theirs, all your spare time, all your liberty; that you will not be false to them, and above all that you should forbid them to be false to you. To return love is never more unpleasant than to pay a debt when one is a very good debtor. It is, at the worst, worry compensated by the satisfaction of knowing that one owes nothing more for the time being, and the perspective which presents itself that the creditor will make fresh loans. You perhaps have never known what it is to have debts?"

"It is exactly," returned Trept, "because I have some debts, that I am never certain of being able to devote to any one the whole of my time, all my attention, all my will—to——"

Madame Hobbison looked at him with a very hearty commiseration, and pressing his hand—

“Ah! my dear boy, money, you see, money!”

A sudden melancholy overcame her. The charm of her faults indubitable and unknown, that virtue, in modest immorality, that is a slave to dreams which seemed in vain to tempt, set off deliciously the delicacy of her face, and while she was inquiring into Trept's affairs in a voice that had naturally become maternal through her woman's instinct in presence of a sympathetic pain, he articulated in a dry voice with a sour look:

“Will you?”

“No,” she murmured, reflecting hesitatingly—  
“no—no——”

At this moment Agnes appeared upon the scene. She shook hands cordially with Trept, with one of those vigorous shakes which, coming from such a little personage, were almost comical; but then a man was really her friend when he was well received by her mother. And any one in friendly association with her mother seemed vaguely in Agnes' innocence to become a being apart, a security in life, a pillar supporting the welfare and respect of the house.







## VI.

"OF you two which is the most trustworthy messenger?" said Madame de Prébois to Des Frasses and Trept, who were equally fervent in their protestations as to willingness.

With their overcoats on, hats in hand, standing in the light which shed its glow at right angles from the drawing-room door, they took leave of her, after the weekly dinner she had just inaugurated at St. Germain to a select circle of friends at the end of the season.

"*Au revoir*, dear madame, and once more, many thanks. *Au revoir*," cried Madame Nully-Lévrier, all anxiety to catch the train, graceful and slim in her mantle of floss silk of Chinese vermilion, surmounted by a hood of white lace under which a heavy chignon displayed in thick coils its provoking redness. While her husband was selecting a cigar from a box Monsieur de Prébois held toward him, Madame Nully-Lévrier, appearing not to see the arm which President Marchpont offered, took that of Jonzac, of whose talent and celebrity until then she was unaware, but which suddenly had become apparent to her through various remarks during the evening in which the composer had

been highly extolled. This came about from one of those generous impulses, a kind of feverish longing for the ideal, which is often to be found in some women, and through which one can almost foresee the capricious hour when the abundant tresses of the sinner would be used to cover in voluptuous prostration the bruised and weary feet of poor Art.

"You will have plenty of time to overtake them," said Madame de Prébois to the two friends who were awaiting her orders. "I just want to write a few words."

She ran to a little desk in the library and scribbled on a blue telegram form. "I write to ask you, my dear admiral, to give to Roland and me lunch to-morrow. Remember, no ceremony. I want so much to see you that, as you see, I am indiscreet." Then folding the letter she quickly wrote the address, "Monsieur de Kerguel, 24 Rue Rembrandt (Parc Monceau)."

Although this occasioned little or no delay, Monsieur de Prébois found time to grumble in that ill-humored way which people have of showing gratuitously the interest they take in others at the expense of those nearest and dearest to themselves.

"My wife will cause you to lose your train. Such things make me shiver. Why in the world cannot these matters be arranged beforehand, Emilienne? Confound it, Emilienne! These gentlemen will be late!"

Madame de Prébois intrusted her letter to Trept, saying to Des Frasses:

"Then you will be strictly answerable for the safe deposit of this as soon as you reach Paris? Now be off—quick. . . . Ah, but tell me again. Was the Balbenthal machine such a success? For my part I only half-believe in Madame Nully-Lévrier's enthusiasm over it. Provided one gets plenty of new acquaintances for her, and here and there one that will take her in, she thinks everything celestial."

"Well, it wasn't half so bad; in fact it was good," said Des Frasses in shaking hands in that spasmodic fashion which makes up in quantity for quality, and in which it was easier to give three than one ordinary shake.

"My goodness!" replied Madame de Prébois, convincing herself by her own words; "I am not in the least sorry, all the same, that I was unable to be present."

Trept was already on his way, a few paces ahead. His companion and he had scarcely gone a hundred yards, when they heard the whistle of the station-master. After a fruitless run they stopped—the whistle of the engine, as it was set in movement, shook the whole of the platform separating them from the station.

"The devilish chatterbox!" grumbled Des Frasses.

"Well, there is nothing for it," said Trept. "We shall have an hour to kick our heels in."

In the lonely obscurity of the fresh evening they lit their cigars and resigned themselves to pace the foot-path leading to the château, whose dark mass a gas-jet here and there only feebly illuminated.

"Are the Mésignys not soon coming back from Fontainebleau?" asked Trept.

"I scarcely know—I couldn't tell you."

The question annoyed Des Frasses. Of course he did not want to say that in four days' time he had an appointment with Clotilde in Paris; and yet the young man felt a strange humiliation, a sort of lessening of his value in his own eyes, by denying his knowledge and playing the part of a simpleton, whereas he knew he could have appeared as a hero.

"At any rate," he added as a sop to his vanity, "according to the intentions which Madame Mésigny expressed to me the other day down there, their return must be close at hand. But tell me," said Des Frasses, to change the subject, "what is your little game with Madame de Prébois? It seems to me that she was lecturing you a long time in that corner."

"You would never believe," said Trept, after a few pulls at his cigar, "what she has got into her head. My dear boy, she wants to marry me! It is enough to split one's sides, eh?"

"How's that? She a match-maker—Madame de Prébois? Oh, then, my dear fellow, I pity you and I must look out for myself. All these good dames, let me tell you, who excite majors and

minors to enter into marriage, when they think they have arranged everything and meet a check, resistance, or even a simple objection, immediately look upon such as a personal affront. They are vexed at arguments and harass themselves to demonstrate, and that sometimes by rude personal affronts, that one should not be too fastidious——”

“The fact is,” broke in Trept, laughing, “that Madame de Prébois gave me to understand that I was no chicken.”

“That’s just it. These wonderful creatures would rather that a wedding should take place, even if the defect of the plan is pointed out to them, than be obliged to make a change in the marriage arrangements they have prepared for others.”

“After what you have said I must put you down as an adversary to marriage!”

“At all events, my friend, I object to the manner in which such things are done as a general rule. This is how I look upon the whole matter. If all the marriageable girls in France were kept, not as the usages of society demand, hidden at home, but were placed in a permanent exposition, with a card attached to each, stating their position in life, their general character, etc., well, nine hundred and ninety-nine out of one thousand men would choose a girl totally different to the ones we see them united to. As a fact, every bachelor, unless romantically inclined, is bound to find a soul congenial to his own, either among his relations or

among the relations of his relations. As to marriages being made in heaven, they are perhaps made in the next flat or in the house over the way. He is not in a position to see her or to know anything about her. But as far as I am concerned, I should, I think, never dare to enter the marriage state, as I feel I should be haunted by the thought of having taken the wrong woman and missed the right one, and according to my feelings, that would suffice to make her far less to me than all the rest."

"Certainly," murmured Trept, who was in a dreamy mood, "with regard to Madame de Prébois and the person she spoke of she didn't have to dig deep, for between ourselves it is some one in her own circle, very much so."

Des Frasses remained silent, cautious, discreet, like a man who, having a secret and keeping it sacred, does not wish to be the recipient of confidences to which he can make no return. But Trept felt an irrepressible desire to talk. His lips seemed to force him to breathe out the too powerful aroma which had so recently taken possession of his whole being.

"My dear fellow, what I have just told you, I need scarcely say, I wish to be kept strictly?"

"Oh, dear friend!"

"Well, it is the little Hobbinson——"

"You don't say?"

"What do you think? It doesn't look at first sight as if the thing were serious. I must, how-

ever, look well into myself to see whether I could not do something more foolish."

Des Frasses seemed suddenly to understand, from the tone of these words, that the matrimonial idea was in a state of crystallization in Trept's mind.

Trept had experienced, in listening an hour ago to Madame de Prébois, the ascendancy which a powerful mind always exercises fatally over surprised indifference. Just as one is led into dressing up anything new brought to us unexpectedly, so Trept's mind was immediately attracted by the pleasure of imagining himself in such a novel aspect, and with the spirit that makes us all believe that everything suits us exactly. Ah! these adventurous dispositions which seem at times so strong, so mysterious, do they not let themselves be borne on by the life around them, while other men wait, deliberate, combine, and compare? And then, after all, who can prove that true wisdom is not abandonment of one's self to the simple power of living—to that centripetal force, invisible and brutal it may be, by which the equilibrium is preserved of all those to whom the instinct thereof is given? Round and round they go without fatigue, under the eyes of the world, stuck to the croup of fate, with folded arms, and radiant look, like those circus-riders whom a single voluntary movement would dash to the ground.

Yes, Trept, during the interview, had almost authorized Madame de Prébois to feel the ground,

to carry out the plan which she pretended had come into her mind by chance, but which really she had thoroughly elaborated since her sojourn in the Isle of Ys.

At present it was merely by hearing himself state the case when he was thinking of having to defend it, that he felt all its defects and a somewhat shameful embarrassment. To present to his companion the whole physiognomy of the affair would be to reveal its imperfections, as we do not perceive all the folds and all the misproportions of a countenance unless, in place of looking at it face to face, we examine it in the impassible rectitude of a mirror. Trept tried to gather some reasons of decent worldly wisdom.

"After all, my dear Des Frasses, there are times in which one would be wronging one's self to reject deliberately the opportunities which may present themselves to add to our current affairs a good round sum."

"After all, that's for you to consider."

Trept was not one of those people who either ask or take advice in a matter on which they believe they have themselves made up their minds, yet on the other hand he could not dispense with obtaining the approval of his point of view.

"I earn lots of money," he continued. "You have sometimes seen me do it. But it has been generally by fits and starts, a hit on the Exchange and such like. I haven't the right to be sick or to stay away for a month. What I put on one side



occasionally belongs to my gambling fund, not to me. The morrow will be my creditor in case I should fail to make it my debtor. Perpetual motion, eh? What a relief it would be to me to know that there was somewhere a good nest-egg to fall back upon, such as even a capital tied up by marriage settlement so that I could not dispose of it!"

The two speakers were walking side by side in the humid darkness, without being able to see each other's faces. In front of them their breath and the smoke of their cigars mingled together in whitish vapor. At times they jostled against each other through the oscillations arising from their struggle for life, just as if such struggle was normal, in this useless necessity of living while waiting for the train to follow the one just missed, and during a time which might be erased out of their life and hurled into nothingness.

"You would reply," sighed Trept, who had never opened his heart to his friend as he was doing now, "that in a bargain of this sort I should sacrifice my liberty. On the contrary, my friend, it might be the means perhaps of gaining it. A daring speculator like myself, always compelled to go to the front, has only one kind of independence, to be from day to day determined to square his account when the game goes against him, by blowing up the caisson. That is being free! Agreed! But if so there have never been any slaves, any convicts——"

"Will the marriage portion be enough?"

"Oh, it is not gigantic; four hundred and fifty thousand francs."

Trept exaggerated the figures named without noticing that he did so, without ill intention, but simply by the force of habit, in making optimistical statements when handling figures in the formation of public companies. Madame de Prébois had only given him to understand positively, and that with an expansive zeal, that three hundred thousand francs would be the sum, for she remembered well, in former confidences, that Madame Hobbinson had told her that Agnes had barely twelve thousand francs a year in her own right from her father.

"Frankly," asked Trept, "what do you think of the little Hobbinson?"

"I think she will be very pretty—for that matter she is so already."

"I understand you; she is a half-grown girl. But after all, my dear fellow, she will soon be eighteen. She certainly doesn't look her age. Well, as for me, do I look mine? How old would you take me to be? No, I would rather you did not tell me—you might probably give me less than I am, or doubtless more than I would care to answer for——"

By the right which every one takes to rectify the faults of others, Des Frasses found fault in his own mind with the disparity in years that existed in these possible mates. At the same time he

pictured to himself the radiant form of Madame Mésigny, which he embraced in imagination without even having to stoop. He fully appreciated the suitability of his own age and her age with a calm conscience, with even a certain pride, as if what he dreamt of was without doubt the union especially blessed by Heaven.

Trept broke out in a burst of laughter. "But suppose it were to happen?—but we haven't got so far yet. Yes, at first it will be rather funny to call Madame Hobbinson mother, mamma. I fear I should look rather sheepish. Why, she is perhaps even younger than I?"

"She is thirty-five or thirty-six, at least so Mother Sorlin told me, and she doesn't love her enough to make her any younger."

Had Des Frasses any malicious intention in thus introducing the name of this person in Trept's meditations, and was the latter conscious of having to give a reply as to his suspicions or not?

"The fact is," he said in the voice of a *roué*, "why shouldn't I rather marry the mother? She is certainly one of the women who have impressed me most. And that's saying something, my dear boy, I can assure you. For that matter, the other day at the Balbenthals I drove her to her last intrenchment."

"And you had to retreat?"

"Of course. But the woman is interesting. She is a peculiar type. Do you think she has a lover?"

"What on earth are you talking about?" replied cautiously Des Frasses, thinking that his good friend Trept had told him enough to make him take a dislike to him for it later on. "I should propose," said he, "unless we intend sleeping at St. Germain's, that we make our way to the railway station."

On the threshold of the station, Des Frasses, in his inferior position as a simple bachelor, jestingly made way for Trept.

"Oh," said Trept, twisting his pert mustache and frowning slightly with his fine tawny eyebrows, "I am not caught yet—one can always be on the lookout for what may turn up; that binds you to nothing," he concluded by a phrase which he had assimilated word for word, and which Madame de Prébois had left her catechumen to meditate upon.

The next morning, about noon, Madame de Prébois and her son were received with open arms by Monsieur de Kerguel.

"Why did your mother not accompany you?" he asked affectionately, and at the same time with the cunning of common politeness; for with half a century's intimacy with Madame Sorlin, in which he had proved that, in spite of the sometimes terrible demands of the tenderness with which she had been animated, and was still animated at times, she had never invited herself to come and visit him, from a feeling of discreet dignity born of education and of respect for that common prin-

ciple which makes every one master in his own house.

During the breakfast Madame de Prébois, whose husband was shortly to fill a financial mission under the French Government in Egypt, begged of the admiral to join her with his powerful voice in the efforts she had been making already to persuade Roland to become a party in this fine trip.

"You know better than any one what is to be gained by youth in travelling. I beg of you to try and knock sense into this mule's head. Monsieur de Prébois leaves Paris the 1st of October and expects to be back by the 15th of January. Besides, in roaming about to the right and left, there will be always something to see."

"How now, you little wretch? Does not your ardor sparkle at the very name of Damietta, Aboukir, the Nile, the Pyramids, the Red Sea? Why, even I, at my age, after all I have seen again and again——"

Roland interrupted softly, but in a resolute and modest manner:

"The lectures for my first year of law begin in November."

"Your law studies," protested Madame de Prébois, "will not run away. You will find them on your return. Law studies! Admit, admiral, that law has not usually the power to inspire such strong passions."

Roland bit his lips, not replying to the tone of raillery in which it pleased his mother to indulge.

At the end of the meal the latter, tired of contending and annoyed at not having been backed up more effectually, as she had hoped, proposed to her son to go out for a walk.

"You will find me at the half-past four train. Try not to get into trouble. Where's your neckerchief? You forgot it again? Oh, you are a nice boy. Get along! You may well kiss me. What are you going to do?"

"I shall take a turn with the foils in the fencing school. I shall also go and see Lucien."

"It is not, perhaps, quite safe to go into your cousin's room."

"What nonsense! He has only boils."

Roland had hidden his plans. As soon as he was out of the house his first care was to go to the Hobbinsons', whom he had not seen since (and who had not been invited again to St. Germain) after the memorable events at the Isle of Ys. And yet Roland was naturally of a frank and open disposition. But something, which he was unable to define, was now placing him at defiance with one who, until then, had personified to him that maternal, divine force under whose protection the spoiled child imagines itself sheltered from all scourges. The young man felt that he was about to acquire a notion of human instability from a peculiar way in which his mother's eyes had lately rested upon him, an expression of a person who fears and yet longs to hurt. This expression, so emotional and peculiar, Roland recognized as hav-

ing felt already in all its intensity when, in a childish sickness, his head and hands held by his father, he had allowed some leeches, which the solicitude of Madame de Prébois had provided to be placed behind his ears.

Monsieur de Kerguel had drawn two chairs toward the recess of a window in his round salon on the first floor over the *entresol*, which looked out on to the Parc Monceau. With the slow seriousness of a patriarch and a somewhat trembling awkwardness he hooked up the white curtains of the window with the loops, so that Madame de Prébois might enjoy the landscape where nurses and maids were circulating, where babies, dressed up, shod, gloved, and bonneted, as is customary with great people, were playing in the sand like little dogs.

"Can you not guess," she began in an angry tone of voice, after a few minutes of silent thought, "the motive which this stupid resistance of Roland's causes me?"

"The motive? Is there a motive? Indeed, dear friend, I had not the slightest idea of it."

The admiral had answered carelessly. Every one connected with Madame Sorlin, only not she herself, might scold without making any impression on him. He lived at home in that kind of peaceful attachment in which the natives of Vesuvius live at a certain distance from the crater.

"What keeps my son back is that he has fallen in love with that little Agnes. Yes, the daughter of your delightful Madame Hobbins."

"For heaven's sake, Emilienne, do not speak in that way. It was at your house that I had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of Madame Hobbinson. She is, therefore, your friend before she was mine. Now, will you allow me to ask if you are quite sure that you are laboring under a mistake?"

"No, I am not mistaken. I have observed Roland on many occasions. My convictions were come to slowly but surely."

"What does Monsieur de Prébois say about it?" objected the admiral, by way of delay.

"Oh, Monsieur de Prébois! He says I am out of my senses. For that matter, I think he would like just as well not to have to take his son with him."

"Reflect that for a youth not yet eighteen the danger cannot be very serious at home."

"It is precisely for that reason that now is the time to act. I do not intend to let the state in which Roland is to linger on, like those diseases which appear to be nothing at first, but which end in developing themselves, and then when they do break out, it is too late to cure them. I don't wish the brain of my son to be more affected. If I don't put matters straight, in a short time I should have a great booby of a boy on my hands who will have a face like *papier-maché*, who will not open his lips at home unless it may be to threaten me with suicide! And that kind of life will lead us God knows through what phases, until the day when I shall be summoned."



"Ah, that is like women. Always the end of the world close at hand. Just count on the tips of your fingers—you have before you seven years of legal sovereignty——"

"Good; and if during that interval one fine morning the young people eloped? Allow me: it must needs be that there are hearts which foresee everything, besides those to whom everything is indifferent! Therefore my plan is to get Roland out of the way, and during his absence to arrange matters for the little girl."

"In what way?"

"In marrying her. A husband would look after her better than a mother often absent; and if he doesn't, well, after all— Now, don't be scandalized. What I am doing in this is practical morality and not practising morality. Well, since Roland refuses to go, so much the worse for him: he will be present at the ceremony."

She had uttered this cruel sentence so sorrowfully that one could appreciate how pity no more formed a part of it than in the celebrated reply of Guatimozin to his minister.

Monsieur de Kerguel was stunned by this maternal initiative, by this active egotism, which, to get rid of a care more or less well founded, placed its hand so mercilessly on the destiny of others.

"Your assistance would be very valuable," continued Madame de Prébois. "The plan from which I expect to reap tranquillity must be approved of by Madame Hobbinson. She will take

your advice. Certainly of that there is not the slightest doubt! Among her surroundings no one possesses the weight of your character. Will you kindly aid me?"

"My child, I am all devotion to you. The sentiments I feel toward you and yours——"

The admiral stopped, embarrassed by thoughts which assuredly he was recalling. At the same time he saw a responsibility arising for him, he foresaw troubles inherent in his position of a buffer between two instincts mechanically thrown by nature against each other. He ventured:

"Excuse my asking, why does this little romance—in case it should prove one—shock rather than touch you?"

Madame de Prébois, in a movement of indignation, crossed her arms on her breast with rather a vulgar, almost insolent, energy.

"Would you admit, I beg, that Madame Hobbinson is the grandmother I ought to accept as my equal for my grandchildren?"

"Pardon me, dear friend, but after the amiable manner with which you receive her, and in which I have always seen you behave to her——"

Somewhat surprised at the unaccustomed assurance which she met in the admiral, Madame de Prébois admitted to herself, with a certain annoyance, that the secret argument, which, at the end of many a debate, had always produced in the same questioner an entirely different docility and a perfect submission, could only have been the

presence of her mother, Ah! if only Madame Sorlin had been able to be there. Then certainly Monsieur de Kerguel would not have squared himself in his arm-chair; he would not have pretended to look at his nose in the polished surface of his nails while repeating: "When one suspects people of some fault one should not invite them to a *fête*."

"I receive Madame Hobbinson, it is true. But just find out what the Maisnils, the Balbenthals, the Buzicourts or the Flercamps think of her, who for that matter do *fête* her no less in their circle. That is to say that at the commencement of each winter each one asks herself if it shall continue. But let only one of those houses shut their doors on her, and you would see if the others would be wanting in energy to follow the example."

"Does any one know from whence she comes—this Madame Hobbinson?"

"She managed to get introduced to me three or four years ago in Van Haffel's studio. In the first place—what was she doing at Van Haffel's? Oh, yes—very well. At the first opportunity I will beg of Madame Buzicourt to tell you what she has already told me about that."

"Such tittle-tattle is unworthy of you," replied the admiral, stung to the quick. "It is wrong to make one's self the echo of it in a flighty——"

"In truth, it is you who are not acting properly. You see me harassed almost out of my mind. Be it so. It is my fault, I am willing to admit it. But you, the old friend of my family,

you do not answer a word as to what I want. You prolong my agony. For heaven's sake have some pity for me. I do not know what appeal to make to you. I no longer know what I may not say at last!"

Madame de Prébois had uttered this last proposition very rapidly in that treacherous tone which offensive motives take when well prepared beforehand; the whole charge is thereat shot impatiently, tempestuously on the adversary.

The admiral looked at her straight in the face, and instantly experienced that feeling of cowardice which overtakes reasonable beings, however brave and vigorous they may be, when confronted by the enigmatical eyes of a cat watching her young. For in the obscurity of the brain outside of that double gleam, one knows that a ferocious law of nature reigns inflexible, irresistible, and mysterious.

"This marriage of which you spoke just now," he insinuated, "requires at least one candidate. Have you already provided one?"

"I have overtures to make in the name of Trept."

Monsieur de Kerguel had a shock of discontented discouragement.

"How can you hope that Madame Hobbins—It would be murder. A child whose youth is so pretty, so simple, and that ripe man about town, that profligate! Do you not feel any scruples yourself?"

.

"My dear friend, I offer what I have found. By the bye, allow me to remark that the daughter of Madame Hobbinson seems to interest you more than my son."

And in the bitterness of her voice one might have thought she was about to appeal to sacred rights, still more sacred than those of long-standing friendship, as if the ties which united her mother to the admiral had been those which constitute membership of the same family.

But a revolt on the part of her questioner would not give her the time.

"Really, Emilienne, you are altogether too unjust. You persecute me with a bitterness of feeling, with a want of all conscience. You forget that I have known you as quite a little girl, and that if I have never had any rights over you, you have always obtained from me a tenderness more devoted than duty. You are guilty, very guilty, in my estimation."

Appalled, Madame de Prébois looked at Monsieur de Kerguel. Then, with a heavy heart and broken breath, she said :

"Forgive me, admiral, I am ungrateful, but if you could only measure the depth of my love for Roland. You may have often thought me frivolous, loving society. Never mind, those are only appearances, for my whole life belongs to my son, to my dear son, whom I have been able to bring up."

A torrent of tears heaved her bosom, rushed to

her eyelids, and flowed over her plump cheeks with that rather grotesque but altogether grief-stricken expression which weeping gives to those faces whom age already begins to turn into a caricature of themselves.

"I am often stupid and wicked—I don't say no; but my thoughts are constantly on him. When he is out, there are days when suddenly I imagine to myself—but that comes of his crossing the road so carelessly—but boys are like that! Well, I imagine that he will be brought home crushed! Then how can you expect that I should be calm or even equitable when I foresee that his whole future is at stake? I implore of you, excuse me, my friend, my dear admiral."

Very little more and she would have sighed—my father! For at certain times thoughts would cross her mind, out of which arose the deepest anxiety of having always to doubt as to whose daughter she really was. Monsieur de Kerguel got up to kiss her paternally on the forehead.

"Tell me," she began again, "tell me if you think I could decently risk, some day, to give to Roland Madame Hobbinson as a mother-in-law. Please tell me that, and I will believe you. I place entire confidence in you."

She thus made abnegation of all she had learnt or guessed, by one of those whirlwinds of the soul which, ceasing to have confidence in itself, acknowledges having been deceived and wishes to be deceived. She persisted.

"Swear to me that Madame Hobbinson is a woman of honor."

"How can you expect one to take an oath in such matters? One supposes, one thinks, one believes; but one does not affirm."

"Then swear to me that you do not know that she is not an honorable woman."

The admiral, embarrassed, muttered the question over as if he had not immediately understood it.

"That I do not know that she is not——"

Madame de Prébois was examining him attentively, suddenly amused at having by chance been drawn by the discussion into formulating such a sentence; but instantly she was wholly given up to the morbid curiosity of holding him under her rigid look, in order to draw out the charmed secret of the admiral.

"Ah, you see," she cried, "you will not swear."

Monsieur de Kerguel, dropping his long white eyelashes, solemnly stretched out an arm, in which all his Breton blood seemed to tingle at the sacrilegious gesture. But no sooner had he accomplished his chivalrous sacrifice, and as if to reclaim his soul from perdition, he developed in all good faith the following reparatory considerations:

"Listen, Emilienne. Do what you think for the best. I should be exceedingly grieved to have influenced you, and to make you decide to live under the blow of distrust or surprises which will always be at the bottom of your nature. Your project is probably a good one, after all!"

This was another form of the gentlemanlike loyalty of the sailor which thus expressed itself in the admiral. And what is more, one cannot have acted as a husband to the wife of a dead friend, for more than forty years, without having contracted the obligation to protect the daughter of the latter.

Hereupon the noise of a carriage stopping at the house and the subsequent ring at the apartment were heard. Madame de Prébois, her ears always on the alert and eyes always busy, had heard the steps of a servant coming toward the antechamber, and as no one had been announced, she saw that Monsieur de Kerguel suppressed a movement as if to ring or to go and see who it might be.

"I beg," she said, "you will not mind me; pray attend to your affairs."

"Oh, I have no appointment whatever, unless it be the architect," murmured the admiral in leaving the room, vaguely timorous like those whom a lasting remorse, although unconscious, holds continually in expectation of some indefinite thing which may concern them.

Left alone, Madame de Prébois without deeper thoughts opened a window to give a little air to her face, which this half-quarrel had heated. Having settled her elbows on the stone balcony she could see the cab, which was stationed at the entrance door of the house. She suddenly took it into her head to raise herself upon her toes, by which means she could see directly on the narrow



side path just where no one could leave the house without her being aware of it.

On his sudden return, Monsieur de Kerguel caught her in this indiscreetly cynical attitude, in an intrusion on his life, to protest against which he would have had at his command stern looks, fine-drawn smiles, and haughty straightening of the figure, if fate had not forced him to exhibit himself under quite a different aspect. The appearance of assurance which he had intended to display, by pretending to put off the discussion to another day, instantly evaporated. He conquered the first instinct which prompted him to seize bodily the robust waist of Madame de Prébois and to drag her away from her point of observation; but in the hurry and confusion, in which he balanced the advantage of giving up before being caught, he surrendered at discretion.

"Would you believe," said he, "that it was actually Madame Hobbinson? She came to ask me—she is making a collection for the poor of Passy."

"Why did she not come in?"

"She is under the impression that you are angry with her. You did not answer a letter some time ago, it appears."

"Oh, the idea of such a thing! How absurd! Send for her to come back. Still better, I will call her myself. Hi! hi!" she cried, bending out of the window and waving her handkerchief.

Madame Hobbinson, with all her senses under

control, knew how to obey gently and gracefully, and did not hesitate to recognize that she was the object of these calls. She raised instantly her powdered little face, dilating her quivering nostrils, half-closing her eyes to the bright sky, making by a supple turn of the neck the black feather, which coiled serpentine on the brim of her large hat, wave backward. She returned with a wave of her hand the good-day which had been sent to her, and understood that she would have to go up again.

She was soon in the drawing-room, greeting Madame de Prébois with the unalterable affability of her face, displaying in her bearing just a touch of swagger, thanks to an air that a light copper-colored jacket, the embroidery and braiding of which was cut in zouave or, Figaro style gave her.

"I will wager," she said, at all hazards and to protect her reputation, of which the look of discomfort on Monsieur de Kerguel's face showed him to be only a middling defender—"I will wager that the admiral has hidden from you the real object of my visit."

"Not at all, my dear," replied Madame de Prébois, kissing her with the good-nature necessary to preserve, in presence of the triple situation of the persons there, her sense of the dignity of good society. "And my aid has equally been secured in the work you are carrying out. Besides, you could not have come more *à propos*. We were speaking of you."

Madame Hobbinson received this piece of news

with a pearly and amiable laugh of thanks. At heart an anxious feeling oppressed her, not so much on account of having been caught in *flagrante delicto* in visiting the old bachelor, but at hearing that they had been engaged in talking about her. She did not care to be spoken about, especially when she was not present. And then, why were Madame de Prébois' eyelids red?

As to Monsieur de Kerguel, he redoubled his serviceable attentions, drawing up chairs here, pushing back a table there, ingeniously arranging things that the ladies might feel themselves thoroughly at home. He wished to take upon himself the rôle of merely supplying the place for an interview of which the issue did not in the least concern him. On the other hand, if he had had a taste for funereal fancies he might have imagined to himself what rivalry unconsciously animated, perhaps, those he was now settling so comfortably opposite each other, in those nice *causeuses* covered with Beauvais tapestry.

"Well, then," began Madame de Prébois, looking successively at her two listeners between the fingers of her hand, "I was exchanging ideas with the admiral as to the happiness which we wish for your charming Agnes. I was imparting to him a project—a project for her establishment."

The American felt an imperceptible shudder. So it was her daughter they were going for now. The daughter, and for what end? It was true she had had an intuitive feeling of discomfort when

she had recommended Agnes to avoid *tête-à-têtes* with Roland; but then, emboldened by the fact that nothing unpleasant had supervened, had she not taken a great risk? Vain fancies have ferocious jaws, and the sting they dart out is poisonous. Madame Hobbinson had given a side glance, from which she instantly foresaw that she could expect no help from the admiral, who was far too preoccupied in the contemplation of his crossed fingers on his crossed knees.

"A project for establishing Agnes!" she exclaimed. "It must be a marriage, then?" And she broke out into another laugh for which she had no longing. Two dimples remained on her cheeks, which seemed to be still laughing under an anxiety which had become silent.

"My goodness! yes—a marriage. Had you never foreseen the day when that little pet would be asked in marriage?"

"Indeed, madame, no. How is it possible that that little frail creature should take the arm of a husband, a real man——"

"At any rate, the frail creature has captured the heart of a real man, who has been good enough, knowing my friendship for you, to choose me to negotiate with you about it——"

"Marry Agnes! But not for three or four years at least, madame! I need scarcely assure you that a more sympathetic ambassadress could not have been selected. And of course your own feelings can have nothing to do with the matter."

"Of course, dear friend, you can think so."

This sentence had been uttered with a smile, in a dry tone, short and strident as a menace. Madame Hobbins inferred that her questioner had reached a point where she could take advantage of the untenable position into which she herself had plunged by entering so inopportunistically.

"In order to convince you," she went on, "what strong objections I have, I have not even the curiosity to know who it is. No, I beg of you, I should prefer not to know him."

"There you are wrong. You should not without investigating refuse this party, whom the admiral and I can both guarantee as being a highly suitable person favorably known to us."

An improbable hope which she had at first discarded, the flash of a mad hypothesis, pervaded the emotion of the American. For a moment she thought perhaps that they were going to offer her Roland de Prébois, some time hereafter, after having laid down a plan to be carried out in the far future, and that they were about to enforce certain rules of conduct in order to prepare her for that future. She would submit to everything in advance. She felt her second heart, that which a mother has in the heart of her child, beating with joy.

Madame de Prébois articulated from the tips of her teeth, and with her hand put back to her eyes:

"Unless—in which case it would be superfluous to insist—you may have some one else in view."

The especially hostile intention of this remark did not escape the notice of the American.

"O madame, I declare to you that I have absolutely no one in view!" she hastened to remark with melancholy modesty.

The conversation between the two women, which until then had been carried on in a tone of social equality, took, by degrees, little by little, one of inequality, without either of them being exactly aware of it, by a kind of tacit and reciprocal intuition of the subordination of equivocal to irrepachable conditions. Madame de Prébois had maintained the attitude and the language of a woman whose position in the world was entirely independent; the other behaved as a well-educated woman also, as the mistress of a well-regulated house, but who "does something for a living," in the same way, for instance, as a high-toned dress-maker or modiste of good birth, elegant, and knowing how to behave in the street when she had a bonnet on her head.

"The candidate I wished to introduce to you," continued Madame de Prébois, "is a highly distinguished man, everywhere well received, a friend of my house. Is that not so, admiral?"

Madame Hobbinson, whose skin, usually so impassive, reddened all over with indignation, turned her grief-stricken face once more toward Monsieur de Kerguel. She found there that expression of encouragement to give in, that exacting promise which she knew better than any one, that look of

egotistical goodness especially persuasive in that venerable physiognomy, which one shows to beings on whom it depends to satisfy one's desires, whatever they may be. Oh! she thought, how I shall make him expiate his cowardly complicity! how I will force him to-morrow—at once—as soon as possible—to drag himself on his old knees, to thump his forehead against the hard and dull floor!

“The consideration is evidently a secondary matter,” continued Madame de Prébois; “but your refusal will cause me a good deal of awkwardness with regard to that intimacy which is enjoyed in my house among all our friends. How, for instance, should I be able to receive under my roof, with gayety of heart, you and your daughter without feeling a scruple for the sufferings of the charming young man whom I know to be in love, deeply in love?”

The meaning of this insinuation was clear. She announced definitive expulsion from the De Prébois mansion. Thus the foundation of her worldly position, built with such pains by Madame Hobbinson, was to be suddenly undermined; the whole façade at whose windows she had succeeded in displaying the remains of her good reputation and, at all events, Agnes' innocence, was now threatened to be overthrown by a single kick of the foot, of that foot, somewhat swollen under the buttons of the shoe but pointed at the toe, which Madame de Prébois, reclining in her chair, was impatiently

agitating beyond her skirt. She was waiting, implacable in her maternal piety and perhaps aggravated as well in her filial piety, in which, by a strange compromise of feeling, she prided herself in avenging her mother. The every-day life-drama with its invisible bitterness was firmly constructed. The two actresses, faithful to their parts of good society people, had to preserve to the end a soft voice, to say nothing of what they had to say to each other.

"In truth," said Madame Hobbinson, "I should be grieved to be the cause of the slightest annoyance to you or trouble to any of your friends. But now I must be serious. Tell me, I beg of you, to whom do you refer? You say that I know him? I cannot guess—on my word I cannot!"

While her interlocutor was now standing on ceremony, the American was placidly insisting, absently thinking of the slight hold she had of society, in spite of all. She cursed the relative honesty which she had imposed upon herself, thinking of what might have been her power, by what ties, hard enough to break the tooth and nail of Madame de Prébois, she would have clung to the life of society, had she not quite recently refused the eldest brother of Madame Maisnil and the husband of her friend Madame de Flercamps.

Ah, if only she could have foreseen!

Madame de Prébois decided at length to produce the inevitable effect which the expected name would bring about.



"The hand of your daughter is demanded by Monsieur Trept."

"What! it is Trept—it is Trept!" exclaimed Madame Hobbins with such astonishment that the admiral looked up; and she, noticing the jealousy it aroused in him, was delighted that she could, with impunity, make him suffer from it. "How, it is Trept! Ha-hha-ha! He is, indeed, the last I should have thought of. The fact is, he never presented himself to me in the light of a son-in-law. My goodness, no!"

"Trept is in a good position," murmured Madame de Prébois, frowning slightly. "He has a splendid connection on 'change among the rich Jews. With regard to his personal appearance——"

The American made a sign that she had nothing to say against that—on the contrary.

"Then, dear friend, your first repugnances——"

"I could not express an opinion before having consulted Agnes."

"Oh, when a mother has discovered where the interests of her child lie, it gives her great eloquence, great authority!"

"However, if my daughter were to evince an insurmountable aversion, or if even she had hidden from me a preference very dear to her, for one can never tell— But even yourself, Madame, suppose for a moment that your child were in question; would you have the courage, even if you thought it for its good, to break its heart? Ah, be con-

vinced that one cannot be too careful in handling the love of these young souls."

This aggressive question, supreme and daring, made Madame de Prébois lose countenance. What had Roland to do in the matter? Why, at his age, should he be taken into consideration? Was he not, thank God, too young? Yes, for that matter Roland was scarcely older than Agnes, and he—had he not the hereditary right to be young, to be too young to gambol, for a long time yet, at his will, like a free colt far from the Tattersalls', where human matters are going on, where social accounts are settled?

"To sum up," asked Madame de Prébois, "I may give our friend Trept some hope?"

"For heaven's sake, give me a little respite!" begged Madame Hobbinson, putting her hands to her forehead.

Things one has promised one's self not to do, the sacred objects one has vowed to one's self, come what may, neither to sell nor to pledge, with regard to such things, one should never be on the verge of bankruptcy if we hope to preserve the illusion of what one is worth and of the abnegation necessary to keep our own.

At this moment Monsieur de Kerguel, regaining courage by having escaped shocks he feared, thought proper to intervene by one of those acts of affectionate attention which cause people to say: "Oh, he was very nice; really, he was very good."

He rolled his chair up to the table, which was close to the two persons, and rested his elbows on it to ask:

"What does Trept make on an average a year? What is exactly his capital? How could one prove his allegations? Let us go into it, Emilienne."

It was now Madame de Prébois' turn to rest her elbows on the table. She appeared to be thinking deeply, turning her thumbs over each other as if to unwind a skein of information.

Madame Hobbinson, by an imitative movement, also drew up. Her eyes still had a troubled look, her mouth was already composed, and she had an obliging manner. Her whole soul seemed made for the circumstances, just as water, which adopts the transparencies, colors, and simple, complicated, pretty or ugly forms of those who enter into it.

And around the circle of this conference, there as everywhere, the interests of the weak were about to be arranged, outside of themselves, by the will of the strong, in the hypocritical language of kindness, at the dictation of personal motives, unavowed and diverse.

In the mean time, Roland de Prébois had gone in all haste to the Square Beausejour, which opened at right angles on the railroad between Passy and Auteuil.

The brick building inhabited by Madame Hobbinson formed the end of the lane. To get to it one had to pass, on the right and left of the alley,

two rows of small hotels, also built of brick, and which were situated at the back of narrow little gardens, displaying identical characteristics and decorated here and there with the yellow descriptive boards of houses to let.

Madame Hobbinson had taken the place when it was yet uncertain whether she would not return to America, and it was only later, by the purchase of sumptuous furniture, that she transformed her house into a home. But the surroundings were still pervaded by an odor of "*furnished*" which emanated from the blinds of the neighboring houses or from their wide-open windows, which often, until four o'clock in the afternoon, let the dusty bed-coverings hang out like tongues, while the cries of children, varying without ceasing, struck the ear, and the yelp of terriers, of deerhounds, and of mastiffs could be heard one after another for a month or two with their Scotch, Pomeranian, or Danish accents.

Roland was obliged to press twice the button of the bell, half-hidden by the ivy of the gate, before any sign of life made itself manifest in the villa. The window-blinds on the upper stories were closed, and the first floor, as well as the ground-floor, was hidden behind a bower, where, above a mass of thick elder-bushes and lilacs, the bushy plumes of a mountain ash were displayed.

At length steps were heard creaking on the gravel walk, and Roland saw running toward him an unknown Mary, who no doubt had replaced

the girl sent away after the scandal of Ys, and who, with a flower between her teeth and curls on her forehead, replied to his summons.

"Madame Hobbinson is out," she said.

"And Mademoiselle?"

"I don't know. I will see."

Having taken the name of young De Prébois, whom she left dawdling at the door, the maid had not far to go back. On the threshold of the house, between the half-open door, Agnes, always on the lookout for anything that might happen, gave a signal to admit him, whose name she had heard.

"It is my friend Roland," she said to a person about fifty years of age who had followed her footsteps with some curiosity—a kind of housekeeper, with threaded needles in her corsage.

Then, in a great hurry, Agnes rushed to a little withdrawing-room, drew back the serge curtains destined to preserve the old-gold sprigs of the new silk ones. This she did so quickly that one of the lines came off in her hand. She opened the piano, sat down in front of it, placed a sonata before her which she pretended to be trying to make out without striking the keys, having scarcely had time to pull out, with little strokes, the embroidered rear of her Kate Greenaway skirt, over which her hair fell, tied into a knot by a rose-colored ribbon close to the neck, and spreading out like a blond bouquet held up by the stem.

A moment after, as soon as Roland had entered, Agnes' little body turned right-about, youthfully





poised on the revolving music-stool, and getting up and clapping her hands, she cried :

"At last, then, at last ! What has become of you ?"

"How do you do, Agnes ? I am not disturbing you ?"

"On the contrary. You see I was studying my piano," she said seriously, and closing it with one hand while with the other she was replacing one of her pretty shoes, or rather a sort of slipper of pomegranate velvet with slashes at the ankles, which she had somewhat disarranged in her haste to place it on the pedal.

"Ah, you were practising," replied Roland, who affectedly shook his head. "*À la sourdine*, then ! for a moment ago one couldn't hear you—and look, your music is upside down."

Agnes tore the music-book out of his hand with a blush of some confusion and of impatience.

"Leave that alone, if you please ; it does not belong to you. Do you know that mother is out ? She must have gone to the Louvre !"

"It is fortunate, at all events, that you are here."

"Oh, mother will never take me to the large stores on account of the crowd."

"If Madame Hobbins leaves you thus often alone I shall have great pleasure in coming to keep you company."

"I should like nothing better. Mother is really too fond of the novelty counters. Some weeks she goes there two or three times."



"Well, all that does not explain to me why you put your notes upside down to read them."

"Good gracious, what a tease you are! May I not know my pieces by heart?"

"Why, certainly! Is it also a method your piano teacher has which obliges you to dip the ends of your fingers in blue and vermilion before placing them on the keys?"

Agnes had suddenly looked at her right hand, the extremities of which she proceeded to suck with the conscientious dignity and purple tongue of a young animal.

"It would more likely be," she murmured, "my painting mistress' lesson."

"Might one see what you are painting just now?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders, and with a poor and rather silly denegation said:

"No, it is too ugly; you would laugh at me."

"That is a very ugly thought. I am quite sure you are doing something delightful."

"In any case, it was something intended for you. Yes, sir. But mother ridiculed me so that I dare not work any more upon it except when she is away. Oh, she did not forbid me to go on with it, only because she thinks I am not going on with it."

"You are really too good. So it is really for me. What in the world can it be?"

"Will you leave me alone when I have told you? I was coloring my photograph; but I have taken good care to hide it away."

"May I have a peep at it at least, since you intend it for me?"

"No, Roland—no. Besides, I very much doubt whether mother will allow me to give it you, even if it were successful. But don't let us talk any more about that. Tell me rather why we have been such a long time without hearing anything about you. Every day I kept saying to mother: Is it not impolite of us not to pay a visit to St. Germain? I was also continually asking if we ought not to write to Madame de Prébois to know how she was. It all ended by a good scolding which I got."

"Poor Agnes! How did you get scolded?"

"Mother replied that I had no manners, that she was very grateful to me for my advice, that she thanked me very much, and that if I persisted in thus persecuting her she would order me to dine in my room. Oh, she was in a terrible passion. 'Is it possible—a girl of that age who ought to console me in all my troubles!' My mother also told me I was stupid, that I had no heart; and then she began to cry, and then I cried too. She kissed me: she said that we ought to go and live in the country, in some corner in one of those villages in Brittany which we had seen on our return from Ys."

And Agnes added, with a resigned look very cunning, which made her upper lip almost touch the end of her nose:

"She says that, but she could not resign herself to it. My mother must always have something to

distract her thoughts, to dress for, to go among people for. The moment we are alone she looks like a sick person."

"Tell me, Agnes, did your mother seem angry with mine?"

"Not in the least. Once only she said that it was not good for relatives to live together, and that they would not catch her going again to the admiral's island. Don't forget, Roland, that I am talking to you in confidence; and then, you know, she just says that, but if the admiral were to invite her again she would not refuse. I need not be very clever to make her out, she is so fond of the admiral. But how about your mother, is she angry with us? No—that is not so? It would be terrible. I merely ask you this because yesterday I heard the admiral whispering to mother, so that I might not hear him, 'Have confidence in me. All will be well. Madame de Prébois has a heart of gold.' Can you understand what all that means, Roland?"

"Where did you see the admiral? We just now breakfasted with him; he did not say a word about you."

"Good. (I am now putting my foot into it again.) It is true I was told not to say that the admiral had dined here, because he had just written to your house, excusing himself on account of sickness. For that matter I am off my head; when the admiral comes there is nearly always some story of that kind."

"For the day before yesterday?—it must be a mistake. Mamma could not have invited him—we were at Chatou."

A silence ensued between the two friends. This inexplicable imbroglio overjoyed them. They looked at each other smilingly; they were delighted to detect in a lie their seniors in life, those whose current observations seemed to constitute for them the infallible precepts of a grammar for life. And their youthful imaginations, ferretting in silence, played with these entanglements of intrigue, so dangerous to them, in the same way as puppies gnaw madly the knots of the hunting-whip.

Suddenly Agnes commenced again, agitated by an irresistible desire: "Would it give you *very*, *very* great pleasure if I were to show it you?"

"What?"

"My colored photograph."

"I should say so! Go and fetch it, quick!"

The girl ran up four steps at a time to the first floor, returned in the same manner, and holding out an album card to Roland—

"I should have greatly preferred not to show it you," she murmured, throwing herself into a great arm-chair at full length and hiding her face with her hands by a charming instinct of physical shame in thus laying bare her modest pride in her secret work.

Roland, however much he had the desire, did not succeed immediately in becoming enthusiastic over this piece of coloring. In order to find suit-

able praises he scrutinized the picture where the brush of the young girl had, properly speaking, only made blotches on the cheeks, two patches of the conventional red, two blue spots on the eyes, through which the limpidity of the soul no longer became transparent. The boa of Thibet goat's hair had become dirtier rather than whiter.

By degrees Agnes opened her fingers to allow the real anxiety of her look to appear, so soft and so truly blue.

"Eh? What an abomination!" she cried, forcing herself to laugh.

"Will you be quiet? It is very well done—very interesting."

"What?" said she, instantly credulous. "You think it pretty, without any nonsense? Yes, but you have observed how the color has spread round the hair."

"Oh, the hair! The hair is merely a detail."

Then standing behind Roland and leaning against the back of the chair, as the latter held the picture alternately away and then near, to study it exactly, she murmured in a complaisant contemplation of her work: "Then as sure as sure can be you don't think it too bad?"

"That is to say, it is very good!"

"You see now, Roland, I have a trade. I should be able to do something if revolutions obliged me to earn my own livelihood."

She said "revolutions" in a mystical tone, knowing no more about them than of the deluge; but

she was prepared to accept the upsetting of the world, for she saw herself, in the midst of universal ruin, painting photographs ordered by her friends and acquaintances, who nevertheless had of course remained rich.

"And I who have no trade," said Roland, "what would become of me?"

Agnes had the brave look of being able to provide for all.

"Ah," said he, "if my relatives would only allow me to follow my vocation.—But it is no good my even speaking to them about it!"

"Nor to me: you have never spoken to me about it. What vocation?"

"I should have liked to have been an actor."

Agnes thought a moment, weighed the value of this idea, and said pensively: "Actor! you must have plenty of cheek, you know! Oh, it must be an exciting kind of life. You would like to be an actor in Paris or abroad?"

"In Paris. If I had engagements abroad I should go."

She pictured to herself Roland draped or cuirassed according to the dress in which she remembered heroes among the few pieces to which she had been taken.

"Do they not say," she hazarded, "that many actors make their wives very unhappy?"

"On account of what?"

"I do not know. In the first place, they can only get home late, very late."

"Well, their wives have only to go and see them act."

"Yes; but all the same they are not always together. I say, why don't they let you take a part when they have private theatricals at your mother's?"

"It is on account of my degree; but this winter mamma has promised me that I shall take part in the first representation. I shall also write poetry—monologues. I am studying already. Do you want a sample?"

In her ready consent Agnes was not satisfied with merely sitting down. She chose her place. From a modest listener she was already transformed into a spectator, her forehead sententious, her eyes glistening, her mouth ready to expand, to feel, to blame. Roland began to declaim a piece of prose unknown to Agnes, although celebrated at evening parties where young ladies abound; then he recited a piece of poetry, equally well known to the *habitués* of rosebud balls. One was the history of a May-bug which had indiscreetly introduced himself under the suspenders of a waltzer, and reduced him to the plight of being a *sans-culotte* when the orchestra recalled him to the ball-room. The other was the apology of a fly at the mayoralty which caused the failure of a marriage ceremony by persistingly poisoning itself on the nose of the bridegroom. At those passages which the declaimer emphasized by raising his voice or by redoubled gesticulations, the "audi-

ence" applauded or was convulsed by laughter. Were these the expressions of a real astonishment in face of this entomological facetiousness or the expansive outbursts of good-humor, tender and faithful? Whatever they may have been, Agnes paid back in sterling money, good and sonorous, the whole sum of compliments she had previously received.

Roland was pleased with himself and with her. Both tasted the ineffable joy of being of one mind in everything. He kissed her hand. Calm and happy, she refused him nothing. What would she have done had he kissed her on the forehead, on her cheeks? Doubtless nothing. Most assuredly nothing. The lips of her boy friend had instilled into her whole being a delicious warmth, which, long after their withdrawal, she still felt coursing through the peace of her conscience, just as the listening ear continues to listen, although the vibrations have long ceased, to the striking of the hour which it longed never to hear come to an end.

"Confound it!" said Roland, "I have only thirty-five minutes to be at the station. You must come, if only once, to St. Germain before we return to town. If mamma should not think of it, I will beg of her to invite you."

"It is such a happiness for me to dine at your house!"

"*Au revoir*, soon, Agnes. Give my respects to Madame Hobbison."

"*Au revoir*, Roland. But say, you are taking



my photograph away with you ! No, you mustn't ! At any rate, don't let any one see it ! ”

The young man, who was already hurrying away, spurred on by the fear of arriving too late at the rendezvous made by Madame de Prébois, turned and placed his hand on the inside pocket of his jacket. His gesture said eloquently enough that the cherished image was there, near his heart, as a reflection of his heart, and that no earthly being could suspect its secret hiding-place.





## VII.

THAT afternoon Des Frasses had managed, half an hour ago, to mount the stairs of that colossal building erected to the love of glory, but which the caprice of a woman had for the time being dedicated to the glory of love. Now, Madame Mésigny had been granted (only) a quarter of an hour's grace. This was, then, just sufficient to enable her to reach the steep and peculiar region which, from precautionary measures, she had chosen for the rendezvous, and thus the respective proportions of male and female unpunctuality, which constitute punctuality in affairs of gallantry, would have been rigorously observed.

After having leant on one of the barriers which prevented him from taking the wrong way in the principal aisle of the great building, Des Frasses convinced himself that it was not the succession of steps in the staircase which made his heart palpitate, and began to traverse the lower corridor, on a level with which the winding row of floors presented a narrow and dark orifice.

The deserted place, where the sounding steps of the young man's walk seemed to scare up a swarm of draughts, looked like the arched roof of a cloister,

the corridor of some monastery converted into a jail and modernized by means of greasy, dull gas-lamps. But notwithstanding the sharp atmosphere of the place and the melancholy which percolated from the walls, between which the lover felt himself a prisoner of some irresistible power, a kind of intoxication stimulated his nerves. It came to him from the spirit breathed by a "first rendezvous," by that powerful mixture of sensations which prevents one from feeling tired, hinders one from being cold, braces the nerves, and almost enables one to be clairvoyant in what is obscurity to human eye-balls.

Des Frasses felt very forcibly that it would be incumbent on him soon to utter many words and to formulate decided ideas; and, besides phrases of gratitude and of devotion, his imagination did not succeed in providing him with a set formula especially appropriate for a novel situation, or with anything that was both practical and noble, original and progressive. Then, in the light giddiness of expectation, in the pleasing idleness of reposing while others worked, he preferred to dream about what Clotilde would, on her part, have thought of to say to him.

He had already a very good idea of what "first rendezvous" were, by a double experience, which had resulted in nothing, with women in society. His début in that character had taken place four or five years before at Cours-la-reine, in a deluge of rain, with the daughter of the master of the hounds,

herself a huntress and married for the second time, whom he believed at once when she declared solemnly that her modesty could never allow her to sacrifice herself to two men, at least while both were living. The second "first rendezvous," at the exit of the Colonne concert, brought Des Frasses in presence of a celebrated society singer, a titled woman judiciously separated from her husband, whom he had until then only seen under the glow of wax-lights, and only with the tolerant eye which looks upon beings and objects in themselves and not in what they are relatively to one's self. This one he had not believed in when, in the short space of time of seeing her home in her *coupé*, she thought proper to assure him that her interest in him, however strong it might become, would remain infallibly platonic; but he had taken her at her word, and, having bowed very low, had taken leave of her, muttering hasty and embarrassed excuses, as those do to whom it has happened to have mistaken one person for another.

According to these examples, Des Frasses did not doubt but that Madame Mésigny would begin by an exceedingly chaste profession of faith. But even in the face of the most palpable sincerity, he was determined to-day not to be repulsed. However, why did the young woman not come? Here it was now ten minutes past four o'clock. And if by chance she should not come through forgetfulness, or from having changed her mind—oh, that would be too bad! In that case Des Frasses

racked his brain thoroughly for all manner of reproaches which he would heap upon his beloved at her house the next day, and indignant exclamations and recriminating complaints began abundantly and silently to roll in his throat and to swell his lips, that had been empty so long as he had only tried to provide them with the language of adoration.

Suddenly Madame Mésigny appeared, out of breath, almost furious at having to ascend so many steps, not sufficiently under self-control to consider that she owed all this trouble to her own fancy. She was dressed *à l'intérieur d'Arc de Triomphe*; dressed, that is to say, in a mouse-colored gray costume, relieved only by a veil white as one of the air-holes and shedding a dim light around. Her face was invisible, enveloped in perfumed shade.

"The janitor down-stairs stared at me strangely," she said, by way of salutation. "Oh, while I was scaling that horrible snail-shell of a staircase I had nearly all the time at my heels the crutches of a beggar, who kept crying, 'Hou! Hou!' What could he have against me? Say, why did the janitor look at me like that?" she asked imploringly, ready to cry and hastily begging for a reassurance which she was nevertheless not inclined to be satisfied with.

"Come, darling little friend, do not excite yourself thus. Let me thank you, and express in a whisper my happiness!"

He took her hand tenderly; but the kid glove,

inert and smooth, slid without stopping and escaped.

Clotilde evinced an awkwardness and painful mobility in her bearing. The disordered wandering of her thoughts threw her, for the first time in her life, in fear of the police, and she experienced profoundly, like the fear she had had when a little child of ghosts, that sensation of ignominy for which persons in her station of life were not made and which is generally unknown and inconceivable to the well-to-do middle classes.

"I warn you," she said in trembling tones, "that I cannot stay. I ought now to be at my mother-in-law's. She does not receive after half-past four."

"Oh, indeed—your mother-in-law! No, you know, chat——"

"If you please, my dear, don't start making fun of people; for if you do——"

And by the way in which she raised poutingly her flexible neck, after having shown such prompt and marked susceptibility, one could easily guess that she was thinking, "To-day it is my mother-in-law; to-morrow it will be my husband's turn to be ridiculed," and she vowed to herself that, come what might, she would not tolerate such a tone.

"For pity's sake, raise your veil. Let me see you, so pretty as you are, while I listen to you close to you, without witnesses."

"There; are you satisfied?" she answered, pushing back the lace, which fell back immediately, only to rest on the rosy tip of her nose.

The eyes were still hidden, ambushed in the darkness, but the open mouth exhaled freely its fresh and excited breath.

At this moment, the predominating care in Clotilde's mind was **that** of having doubtless fallen in the **estimation** of her best friend, in consequence of the indiscretion which her love for him had occasioned her to make. How many women under like circumstances would be relieved from such scruples of false humility, if they would only admit to themselves that the scruple refers to the only danger with which perhaps they never are menaced! When will they admit that the most respectful of their lovers have never figured them, even in their dreams, more especially in dreams, on that imaginary pedestal, out of reach of hands, from whence they fear to be dethroned?

"My conduct," sighed she, "must give you a very bad opinion of me."

"It is you, on the contrary, who must think ill of me to accuse me of such sacrilege! I would that it were possible for me to speak to you on my knees, only to——"

"Yes, you say that out of generosity, but I bear you a grudge all the same for coming to this rendezvous! If you had any esteem for me you ought not to have thought that it was serious."

"Clotilde, I esteem you, I love you. Be just to yourself and to me."

"Would you be flattered if your sister, the married one, and about whom you often tell me, were

to conduct herself with some one as I am conducting myself with you?"

"My sister is not troubling herself about us; let us not do so about her. Do not invoke all those prejudices, all those principles of strict virtue invented by heartless people. It is neither difficult nor interesting to be virtuous in their way; they have only to do nothing and to resemble each other! But the true value of human beings, that which allows a number among them to distinguish themselves from the crowd, to form an *élite*, is their fine susceptibility, the impulse which they feel to be weak and tender; it is their generosity, the infinity of emotions they are capable of giving, feeling, sharing. Is it not better, my darling, is it not more poetical to thus conceive existence?"

Just then a hurried noise, as of mallets striking stone, was heard at the top of the staircase, and issuing from the door, among a family of English, the head of which carried a field-glass in a sling, the apparition of a limping and deformed boy suddenly appeared.

"Look," murmured Clotilde, "there is the cripple who annoyed me just now. Don't say anything to him; I don't want to see him."

The cripple stopped for an instant behind the two backs which the silent couple had turned upon him. He was chewing between his teeth the stump of a cigar and trying to articulate some street-Arab slang for the occasion, which would not come. Then he decided to pass along with a grin



and snarl like a grating saw, and with the hammering of his rapid wooden feet on the resounding floor.

"*Adieu*—I must go," declared Madame Mésigny, overcome once more by an oppressive feeling of sickness.

She made a hurried, hesitating step as if to depart and as if she had been disobedient to herself.

"I beg of you a few moments longer. Not to be with you is not to live! Ah! if you could only be within me, only see into my heart! The love one feels one cannot explain; one looks like an idiot, and one could, one ought to be so tender!"

"Well, it is certain, then, that you love me, that you love me wholly, with a true love, with a most faithful love, with a love— In a word, I don't know, but with a love that I want!"

"Oh, yes!"

Clotilde having invented an improbable hypothesis, immediately felt the necessity to prove at once its practical consequences.

"And if, for instance, circumstances were now to separate us forever, would you continue to love me always just the same? Could you bear the thought of never seeing me again?"

Des Frasses did not reply immediately, a little undecided as to the meaning of the question and as to the reply which his questioner would prefer him to make. He tried, drawing nearer to her, to read in her eyes, from which occasionally flashes, not expressions, pierced the veil.

"Never to see you again!" he risked repeating at all hazards. "Indeed, I could not bear that!"

It was now the young woman's turn to reweigh what these words were worth, before deciding if they just suited her.

"Then it is not with your heart that you love me!"

"I swear to you that it is."

She made a slight movement of contradiction and continued:

"I want you to love me with your heart, with your head——"

"But you, my beloved, will you not give me a loving word? Will you not pour into my soul a few drops of your pure soul to quench a little my thirst for love?"

"I? I feel happy near you, my friend, better than anywhere else. Far—it gives me great pleasure when we converse together."

Clotilde was fathoming at the same time the look of Des Frasses, to assure herself whether her phrase conceded enough and if her questioner were satisfied with it. Then, finding it necessary to be at once more kind, she confessed her confusion at her ignorance of the young man's first name and her impatience to learn it.

This thought, indeed, was one of those with which, in her prevision of having to bestow some largess of sentiment, she had provided herself before coming there, when she was still at home,

and even while breakfasting with her husband. It was like a bone to gnaw which she had brought from the conjugal table to offer as food to an appetite which, without wishing to class it, she nevertheless guessed to be somewhat cynical.

"Dieudonné," she repeated with the same face as if she were relishing a bonbon. "The name is original and in good taste. And my first name—mine, do you like it?"

"Very much! And rightly so. St. Clotilde is the patroness of my parish."

"How strange, is it not?"

And the young woman, quite surprised at the coincidence, resumed:

"Decidedly I must go."

"Oh, not before you have shown me your eyes!"

"How exacting you are! Why do you wish that? Will you be any the happier for it?"

And as, in the absence of any visitors in the neighborhood, the enterprising fingers of Des Frasses advanced to completely raise the white gauze, she made a step backward, scared by this material demonstration of passion; but not refusing to make some concession, she overcame her modesty so far as to be willing to uncover her eyes by a hasty, trembling, submissive gesture, her elbows modestly placed against her waist. Then she lowered her eyelids and firmly set her teeth between her half-opened lips, partly displaying by this semi-smile the joy of a woman who knows





she is being contemplated, and the childish cunning which made her pretend that she was unaware of it.

"Oh, little darling!" murmured Des Frasses, "I have not yet told you the first word of all I have to tell you! Do not leave me thus without my having confided to you something of the great secret of my trouble. Alas! it would be awful to make you angry!"

Madame Mésigny's face became still more beautiful by a look of friendly astonishment.

"Will it not seem abominable to you, Clotilde—the confession of this mite of love which I implore you to give me—I, who love you to distraction? Well! Even if I had it, I should still not be happy! No, perhaps just the contrary. The delirium would at once become more intolerable; I should not have an instant of sleep, of rest, of calm; not even one of discouragement, which often is an advantage. You need not hide yourself; it is I now who have to turn away. But pray listen—you hear how my voice trembles, how low I speak, quite low."

The young man's mouth had almost touched an ear, which he had the unhopèd-for joy of seeing was not withdrawn.

"That which my madness dares to desire from your pity, my beloved, I cannot express. I cannot even have a wish but you should know it entirely. I am even afraid that you may guess it. Clotilde, the ambition of my love is ungovernable; it knows

no bounds, none. It goes far, far, far—oh, depend upon it, further than you think.”

And while she did not protest, remaining perfectly still and so silent that it appeared as if it were inattention on her part, Des Frasses looked her right in the face and added in a firmer tone of voice :

“In a word, my desires go as far as possible—beyond everything—all!”

Then Clotilde moved, almost imperceptibly and very slowly, her pretty head in an affirmative manner, sad, oh, so sad! She made a sign that she perfectly understood what it all meant; that it was useless to insist further; that no chance whatever was left for misunderstanding; that the prospect was not infinitely odious to her imagination nor altogether unexpected, but dismal, melancholy, lost in depths invisible at present—far, far, much farther, no doubt, than he thought—indeed, no further possible, beyond everything, everything!—all!

“Clotilde, for God’s sake, Clotilde, why are you silent?”

“What can I say, my friend? I am very miserable. You are asking me to decide my whole life.”

She, too, imbued with a kind of cabalistic respect for the number two, appreciated that the second giving up of one’s self to another, after one’s husband, was decidedly the maximum that an honest woman could allow herself to do, and by one of those considerate actions which instinct implants

in creatures with regard to their future, she vaguely feared to spend, one after another, her twofold right of giving herself, and thus at the very outset of her career to lavish that which was, as it were, the reserved fund of her dowry.

"As for you," she continued, "it may be only a pastime. Oh, I don't doubt your loyalty! But if you are deceiving yourself, my dear, if you are merely obeying a caprice?"

"Unkind one! How can you? No, I am not making a mistake. I also—it is my whole life that I offer you."

"And then, frankly, are you sure that it is absolutely useful? It must be so requisite, so necessary!"

Des Frasses swore with the utmost solemnity that it was most requisite, that nothing could be more so.

With a sudden sharp and brilliant glance Madame Mésigny had fixedly looked the young man in the eyes. The latter sustained the scrutiny, shook his head energetically several times, and his confidential air, without uttering a word, was conclusive:

"Yes, do not let us insist upon it, we are tacitly agreed; nothing is left for me, neither ordinary friendships nor regrets, not even souvenirs of a miserable past which I don't care to know what they may have told you about. Banish that unjust mistrustfulness, and, perhaps, that repugnance. Ought you ever to remember such stories? Have



such things ever been? For me there is only *you*; there has never been but *you* and there will never be anything else but *you*."

"Let me go, my friend, I beg of you. My mother-in-law is now getting ready to put on a face as long as that. I know her. Ah! what a nuisance—there is some one else coming up!"

"I shall see you again to-morrow?"

"No; not to-morrow. Do you want absolutely to know why?" she said, with familiar coquetry. "Very well: I have to try on a corset at an hour which has not yet been fixed upon; I am at the mercy of a telegram. Now, admit that the obligation is a sacred one. Have you noticed how I have wasted since you remarked at the Balbenthals how thin I had grown?"

"Yes, indeed," the lover hastened to reply, in contradistinction to what the husband no doubt would have maintained (and is it not in this simple contrast between the Mésignys and the Des Frasses that the reason lies for the perpetual existence of the Des Frasses?). "The day after to-morrow," objected he, "I shall not be at liberty; I wish to be at the reception at the Academy."

This second hindrance to their meeting again, although not coming from her, was well received by the young woman. To tell the truth, her intrigue had already become a domineering attraction, a powerful distraction; but now that she felt the secret live and take form, she was favorably inclined to any delay which would not interfere

too much with her daily habits, and which would permit her to prepare a place there for a new life.

Neither he nor she would any more have thought of being annoyed than of being amused by this contrast between the frivolity of the obligations to which one and the other thought they were bound for two days, and the absolute and lasting sacrifice of all they had mutually promised to make until death. .

"We come now to Sunday," observed Des Frasses. "Well, Monday—will that suit you? Where? Shall it be at War's tea-place, at the same hour as to-day? It will be early enough so that there will be no one in the establishment; and, besides, one has always the right to be hungry or thirsty and to have met there by accident."

"So be it; that is settled. Here, for instance, you could never induce me to come again."

She looked round at the black and dirty arcades, at the walls lugubriously lighted, which resounded with the noise of heavy shoes. And suddenly, giving way to a shocking and frightful fancy, which she had had several times to discard—

"I fancy, I do not know why—it is foolish what I am going to say now—I picture to myself that it must be something like this—St. Lazare—oh, don't be offended! I beg your pardon. I have often mad ideas. You can see that I am laughing."

And she was gone without giving Des Frasses the final opportunity to repeat that he loved her, to thank her, or to swear once more that he would

be hers constantly, always, forever and ever—that is, every time he had not a ticket for the Academy.

She looked back before disappearing, her cheeks still red from a somewhat ashamed and forced laugh, and her great, demure eyes threw out a rapid glance of defiance to the universe—one of those flames of vice issuing from one knows not what pit of atavism, and which possess, all unknown to them, in a latent state, the souls even of the most innocent of those who, since six thousand years of creation, are the daughters of the daughters of women.

\*

\*      \*

In the Rue St. Florentin, nearly on the outskirts of the Place de la Concorde, three golden letters inscribe the name War on the front of a shop, of which the façade is composed of mahogany-colored marble. The glass door is so shiny that one cannot see through it, and in the centre of the panels and the screens that divide the interior is again the name of War.

Nothing further indicates the business carried on by the proprietor, or rather by the proprietress. But whoever moves in elegant society knows, at least by reputation if not from having lunched there, that quiet salon in which, without losing caste, society ladies can go alone or entertain their friends; whereas those of the demi-monde never dare to enter unless escorted by a gentleman.

No sooner had Madame Mésigny crossed the

threshold of the empty establishment than she recognized Des Frasses' beard at the entrance of one of the retreats which had been constructed at each end of the public room, like grottos in polished ebony wood, where the pomegranate velvet of the portières, drawn close at the top and bottom, only permitted a view of the interior, thanks to the suppleness of the bands, through a narrow, diamond-shaped opening.

A kind of a young lady in waiting with a black apron, maid of the tea and cakes and governess of the chocolates, had gone toward the customer, but stopped, with the tact of zealous accomplices, on observing that the latter had attained her object, and had quickly crossed the space, taken up by tables and chairs as yet unoccupied, over the discreet matting-covered floor, which revealed no sound of her footsteps.

"No," replied Clotilde in an undertone, while Des Frasses, who had risen, was offering her a seat beside him, "I won't sit here; it would look too much as if we had chosen a hiding-place."

She made for a little table in an angle in the large hall, and sat down first on a bench which was against the cymatium; then she preferred to change places with her companion, so that she might not have her face toward the street. Nevertheless, on that day Madame Mésigny comported herself in a placid manner, at ease even, almost serene; she had evidently been giving herself a lecture, as much as a woman who respects herself

is capable of when effrontery becomes merely a conventional matter. She declined to take anything which nourishes, quenches thirst, or fattens; but when some drops were placed before her she could not resist the pleasure of taking off her gloves and fishing with her nimble nails, so adroitly as not to get them sticky, round the rim of the crystal dish filled with aromatic sweets.

"Am I very late?" she said, in consulting a little watch encased in old silver in the handle of her sun-shade. "It is Albert's fault! a dispute of which you have no idea. My God! how stupid husbands often are! If they only knew what harm they do themselves! Oh, don't make a mountain out of a mole-hill; it was nothing at all, a foolish thing with which I will not bore you!"

"Does not everything which happens to you interest me as much and more than my own affairs?"

"Yes, but if Albert were ever to find out that I told you about it he would never forgive me. In the first place, you must know that I keep the money for household expenses: my husband finds that I am a better manager than he, and so far he is right. For I thoroughly understand house-keeping, my dear, without your supposing so, perhaps?"

"I am perfectly convinced of it."

"Well, I usually place bank-notes in a large satin pocket-book, in which I formerly used to keep sachets of vervain, and I put the whole thing in

a drawer among my underlinen. I am fond of these family details. You must not find them very exciting, eh?"

Des Frasses replied by a long closing of the eyelids, which tended to concentrate between the eyelashes the most ardent and fascinating of expressions.

"In a word," resumed Clotilde, "just now, as I was about to dress, I perceived that some one had been meddling with the drawer. No one can go to my chest of drawers without my seeing it at once! The thought came into my head to go over my money: five hundred francs were missing! I immediately ran to ask Albert, 'Did you take our money?' 'No,' he replied quietly. 'It can only have been you or the *femme de chambre*!' As for her, I am sure of her: I would put my hand in the fire on her honesty. As Albert saw I was about to ring, he said, even more quietly: 'Well, yes, I took three hundred francs.' 'I beg your pardon, you took five hundred!' Then, for more than an hour, he obstinately maintained that it was I who was wrong in my accounts. Can you understand any one lying like that? And then the mean, underhand manner! Nothing gives me the horrors like that. If he wants money he has only to ask me for it. I am the first to know that he plays—that he loses. Ah, at last I threw in his teeth, 'Do you wish me to accuse you of amusing yourself with women?' It is true I felt quite sick at disputing, and even now I am quite upset. But

for all that I had the patience not to give in and not to leave until he had apologized to me. That is why I could not be here sooner. Do you think I was wrong?"

Des Frasses had listened to all this story with affectionate attention, interested at once by an unhealthy curiosity at being thus introduced into the most intimate corner of the home life of another being, of descending in a few seconds, conducted thither by the traitress's hand, to the secret depths of a conjugal life of which, through many years of every-day acquaintanceship with the young woman, he would doubtless only have been able to see the surface. And how many husbands would not be very pleased to know with what confident haste, with what talkative abandon, their wives edify some one as to their little moral or physical infirmities!

"You were quite right to hold out," replied Des Frasses. "One should never compromise, especially between husband and wife. And tell me, after this quarrel did not Albert notice that you were in a hurry to go out? Did he not ask you where you were going?"

Des Frasses was rather surprised himself at hearing himself speak of the husband of Madame Mésigny, whom he scarcely knew, in this unceremonious manner. But he felt now on almost familiar terms with the latter. Besides, to call the man whose wife one loves and who bears his name Monsieur here and Monsieur there—is it not like

throwing small particles of ice on her heart and on his own?

"He went out before me," continued Clotilde. "For that matter, I do not inspire him with a moment's jealousy now. For some time past he only suspected Trept, and now that he knows—but yes—why, I haven't told you! Trept came to see me yesterday. He behaved so mysteriously that I thought at first he was about to make me a declaration—my word I did. Luckily he is a young man much better behaved than you, bad man that you are! When I think over it I can scarcely realize that it was you or that it was I."

"Clotilde!"

"Look here," said she with an abandonment of soul, touching through very sincerity, "it is a pity that one cannot foresee things! Certainly, sir, you ought now only to be on the eve of your declaration."

At the rather stupidly foppish smile that Des Frasses could not suppress she elevated her brows and bit her under lip, like a person whom one could not induce to retract a remark.

"At last," she continued, "after having turned our Trept inside out, he admitted, under a vow of secrecy, the facts of the case. Just imagine, he is going to be married!"

"To Agnes Hobbins?"

"How! did he tell you also? I who felt awkward at not being able to speak to you about it—I was a simpleton."



"He told me all about it the very evening that Madame de Prébois hinted the matter to him for the first time."

"At present the demand has been made and accepted. But Trept swore to me by all his gods—but for what reason I am ignorant, for it was all the same to me—that he was not in the least in love. Thus you men, you can take a wife without being in love with her!"

"Well, and you, my dear friend, did you love the man you married? No—is it not so?"

"Allow me, that is to say: Firstly, the position of young girls cannot be compared to that of men, who have the right to do as they please without being obliged to get married. Besides, what do you understand by being in love?"

Des Frasses' eyes were about to reply lovingly and to penetrate the shadowy vagueness which the tendency of their conversation seemed to be spreading around the mind of Clotilde, when they were both disturbed by the arrival at War's of a family in mourning.

It was a mother with her three daughters, two of whom were already grown up, nearly of the same height, and the other of about seven or eight years of age. This company remained for some time standing in the middle of the hall, as if afraid to decide which place to select, with awkward movements of authority and of obedience.

"Leave that chair alone—take this one."

The mother ordered two chocolates, which

were, as could be seen, to be equitably divided, and that having been done, she remained serious, indifferent, vacantly staring at space, holding her black shawl across her knees. The two eldest, sitting in profile toward the flirting couple, threw surreptitious glances and investigatory looks. As to the little girl, she frequently turned half around, head, arms, and bust, to continuously stare at the only "people" there, as if she had permanently taken up her abode at her peep-hole between the bars of the back of her chair. After some time passed in idle observation—such as we always bestow, even when in our dearest states of pre-occupation, on the lives of others when they remind us of ourselves, and when peculiarities strike us in the most ordinary acts of individuals, however unknown to us—after such a silence Madame Mésigny murmured in a subdued voice:

"A question I have often wished to ask you—but you must be very frank. Would you marry me if I were free?"

"Why, of course. That needs no assurance. Can you ask such a thing?"

"And do you wish—from the bottom of your heart wish—that I were free? That is well; I thank you. Who knows, after all, but that some fine day——"

She did not finish the sentence. Quietly pensive in a fleeting dream, she saw herself free in a future already present, but without having undergone divorce or widowhood, without changing any

one else's fate but her own, without anything disagreeable or cruel happening; free, free by a miracle!

Then, satisfied with having settled this point, with the guarantee that what was not to be had come about all the same as she wished, and having adjusted comfortably at her head this pillow of improbabilities, on which she could sleep peacefully and soundly, she wanted Des Frasses to make an inventory of their modest stock of mutual reminiscences.

And whispering so that she might not be overheard by the family in black:

"Have you not forgotten the date of your declaration? Ah, I would have wagered that you had! Well, I have remembered it; it was the 11th of June. Was it long before that that you loved me? When did it begin?"

"I think that my first feeling of love for you goes back to the afternoon when we had our last rehearsal of *The Donkey and the Stream* at Madame Kerzenschein's."

"Wait a moment. That was on the 21st—no, the 22d—of December. Oh, you could not have been in love with me for five months without telling me! That would be too delightful. I cannot admit it."

"Come, come, you suspected for some considerable time what was going on in my mind!"

"No, I was not sure of it, upon my word. Sometimes it seemed to me, for instance at the musical

*matinée* at Madame de Flercamps'—I forget now what you had said in reply to me at the piano, I know not what about—I said to myself, 'Good! it has come.' At other times I thought again, no, it is not that in the least! What is more, I thought you were engaged in other quarters. My cousin had told me you were paying your addresses to her, to her and to Madame de Flercamps, but more especially to her."

Des Frasses contented himself by shrugging his shoulders.

"Then you only loved me since— Let us count : five months and a half, add to which July, August, September, therefore you only love me since nearly—let us say nine months. Remember that it will soon be two years that you know me. According to that you did not love me at all before the 22d of last December?"

"Well, in thinking over it, the truth is that I was struck with you when I was first introduced to you."

"Now don't contradict yourself! Just now you said that you had begun to love me at Madame Kerzenschein's. You should be more consequent in your ideas, my dear fellow!"

"Now for your turn, darling little friend. Admit that you didn't love me a little bit when you went on like this: 'You have insulted me. I order you out. I shall never receive you again,' and this and that."

"You are a splendid mimic. It is very polite to ridicule me, is it not?"

"Oh, don't get angry! I was only joking, because I know you to be as intelligent as you are beautiful and good. I adore you! For pity's sake look at me, Clotilde! I adore you. Say something now! Only explain to me what came over you between the 11th of June and that performance of the 2d of September, after which you suddenly transformed my abject desolation into the most unexpected of hopes. Do tell me, please!"

"Oh, never mind!"

"No, tell me, my adored one, tell me! I am so impatient to get one word of sympathy, more forcible than the others, a passionate one if possible. Until now you stand in front of me, as one might say on the *qui vive*. Say something at least about love, or something which promises love!"

Madame Mésigny, whose lips rebelled at choosing suitable words for a pleasant reply from among the awkward sentences which all appeared stupid to her, covered Des Frasses with a look from her dilated eyes which expressed pleasure, confidence, a perfect mutual understanding, the desire to please. It was like a living rainbow of equal, harmonious, gently-colored feelings.

He persisted lovingly:

"Go on. 'I love you,' just by moving your lips, without saying a word—just so, 'I love you.'"

At this moment the mother and the three daughters had risen and reached the door, which one of the young ladies of War's saloon held open for them. But the whole family had to step

politely on one side to allow a thin woman to enter, an elegant blonde, whose lips and eyes were painted as much as those of an actress on the stage.

She wore the head-dress, the whole get-up even, in the Polish fashion. Holding a black terrier under her arm, she was laughing loudly, displaying marked features and an aquiline nose still turned toward the street, from whence she was being gayly pushed by a young man of an olive complexion, a gardenia in his button-hole, an eye-glass in his eye, with a thick, coal-black mustache which was out of harmony with his juvenile face and delicate frame.

Disturbed by this noise, Clotilde turned round to see who the authors of it could be. But, no sooner had she disdainfully turned back from her merely careless examination than she perceived Des Frasses turn pale, so instantaneously pale that she understood at once, without the slightest possible doubt, who the new-comer was and what a threat of scandal had come to impregnate the atmosphere. And, indeed, it was no other than the plastered face of Madame Olgar, her every-day head, scarcely any different than it looked like in the opera-glasses or in the photographs displayed without number in the stationers' windows.

In her turn, by a rapid inspection of the place the actress recognized her old lover, but she gave no other intimation of having done so than by a slight diminution in the play of her green eyes,

whose disposition it was to glance quickly at even inanimate objects rather than to remain stationary on anything, whatever it might be. At all events, pointing her finger in such a way that Des Frasses might have thought that she was designating him, she suggested to the young dandy, who accompanied her, a table strategically placed half-way between the door and the sitters.

Madame Mésigny (who, from the position she occupied, turned her back on Olgar, and who did not know what to fear exactly from a being to whom, in her ignorance, she attributed fantastic power and wickedness) was too overcome to think of flight, even to move more than a mouse dares when she feels that a cat is behind her. She held her breath with that animal instinct which often can invent no better means of defence than that of immobility.

Some time elapsed, during which scarcely anything was either said or done by any one. Olgar kept silence, and her companion, one of those men with whom whatever they may have to say seems to disappear in their mustache, was silently sulking. Occasionally a noise of claws, scratching the bells on a collar, alone was heard, intermingled with a "Be quiet, Bobby," when the little terrier manifested a disposition to spring toward Des Frasses, doubtless to renew an old acquaintance-ship.

Nevertheless, Clotilde's terror-stricken shame was increasing more and more in imagining herself to

be the object of a hostile attention which rested on her shoulders, coursed through her body, and touched every part of her frame. She shuddered, as no one could imagine possible, at being thus looked at by one of her own sex, a look under which a woman feels stripped, body and soul, and more foully profaned than by the stare of a man, because no intoxication of the senses comes to trouble its natural power, no scrupulous modesty to soften its acuteness.

Des Frasses, who was sufficiently acquainted with the good and bad sides of the actress's character, calculated that nothing now was to be feared of what might have happened at the first outset. But to see the painful terror which crimsoned the beautiful face of his Clotilde, to receive the prayer, which came from the humiliation of her magnificent eyes, which rose toward him as toward the master of all protection, as to the sovereign dispenser of safety, caused Des Frasses in return for this to piously conceive what infinite veneration he owed to this precious cowardice, to this adorable unhappiness. The feeling passed over his soul with the speed of lightning, and it was perhaps the first sentiment of love, purely ideal, that sprang up within him out of that savagery which each one hides from the other, and even from himself, under the semblance of modern decency and in the modern language of homage. And however imperfect, imprudent, or even condemnable before the official morality of men, Clotilde might be, at



any rate he who was opposite her bowed his head humbly, in receiving the baptism of that fraternal religion which one owes to the creature whom one has caused to suffer in any of its poor sensibilities.

Besides this, Olgar's stay was not unusually long. However, shortly before leaving, she asked this question loud enough to be generally heard:

"Why do you not have your crown engraved upon one of your rings, or upon the harness? It seems to me——"

The heavy mustache stood on end to allow a hoarse voice and guttural accent to articulate:

"I only have it on my cards; and the hatter, too, he puts it in the crown of my hat, because one crowns a name, one crowns a head, but one does not crown a finger or a horse."

Olgar finished drinking the contents of a glass of lemon sirup.

"And poor Bobby, that I was forgetting!" she added, in getting up and pouring into a saucer a few drops from a water-bottle. "Do you remember the day I went to your house to fetch him? Was he not a mite? And now is he two or three years old?"

This was for Des Frasses' benefit, to whom Bobby had always been represented as being a dog whose origin was highly respectable, having come, in the regular way, with the family papers from an aunt of Olgar's.

Some reminiscence caused a conquering smile to appear under the heavy mustache.

"Only eighteen good months. He will never be any bigger. The mother is bigger, but the father is still smaller."

"Oh," replied the actress, "he can grow as he likes; it is all the same to me. It is nice to have dogs when they are quite young, when they are playful, with their cool little muzzles; but when one has taught them everything they no longer interest me. I give them to who likes to take them."

This was more especially directed as a Parthian arrow to Madame Mésigny, who, for that matter, was under a kind of anæsthetic stupor, and consequently did not feel the sting.

And, while her little young foreigner ordered at the cashier's desk a package of tea to be sent to her house, Olgar, as if entirely unoccupied, raised herself on her toes to look at herself at a distance in the mirror under which Des Frasses was sitting. He suddenly bent his forehead in order to protect himself from the dart of this glance, while the actress threw back her shoulders to admire her figure, first sideways, then in front, pressing her waist between her fingers. She threw her head slightly backward, arched her eyebrows, and expanded her nostrils in the same way as she would have done in her dressing-room at the theatre, when she had taken the last glance in her mirror where the costume of the last act was lying, and resumed her new face of "Fairy Godmother" or "Juno," which she would proudly take back with her to the stage.

When the reclosing of the door had at length shut out the danger, Des Frasses and Clotilde looked at each other with a momentary relief and the confused distress of two shipwrecked persons who, saved from drowning, find themselves on an unexplored arid coast, where the unknown threatens them on all sides.

"Dear Clotilde!" implored Des Frasses.

She made a sign that he was not to speak yet; she showed that her heart was too full to allow her to answer so soon, or even to listen. But he had not the patience to hold his tongue.

"You detest me, perhaps, now?"

She shook her head sorrowfully, but in a generous and reasonable manner, which seemed to say: "Why? Must you not feel far unhappier than I?"

"Tell me, my Clotilde, you will not refuse to see me again?"

She gave him to understand by modestly looking down that she would not refuse.

"But soon, very soon?"

She murmured "Yes" feebly, in a choked breath.

"My God! how I love you—a hundred, a thousand times more than *before*!"

"Only I will not," she sighed, "come again under like conditions, where one is exposed to such meetings. It was too fearful!"

This was her only recrimination. And neither of them entered into any further explanations over the recent emotions which had tossed them so violently.

"The next time," Des Frasses ventured to say, "would you condescend to come to my house?"

Clotilde remained silent.

"You could do so without running the least risk. The part of the town I live in is inhabited by enough persons of your acquaintance to account, in case of need, for your being in the neighborhood. You would not speak to the janitor. I live on the first floor, to the left under the *porte cochère*. Besides, I would be on the lookout for you to open the door myself. It is useless to add that I should have no servant at home. Let us see. What have you to object to this proposal? Have I not prudently provided for everything? Can it not be easily carried out?"

He was urging his passionate appeal with hypocritical calmness, asking the young woman to come to his place, gravely, firmly, with dignity almost, as if it were merely paying a conventional visit. And she, without objecting in any way that might make it appear as if she looked upon the favor asked in any other light than that of a slight mark of friendly duty to fulfil, battled against it nevertheless with quiverings of her whole body, with wild eyes, and face distorted by a virtue dying in the flower of its age.

Des Frasses having ceased his vain implorings, Clotilde became calmer. But at the sight of her companion's sad face a spirit of pity overcame this feminine heart.

"Would you have such great pleasure, really, if I were to come and see you?" she asked.

"Heavens!" said he, already quite transformed.

The experience, somewhat equivocal as to its social quality, which Madame Mésigny had just gone through deteriorated her chaste will, and brought a new agent of trouble to the supreme limpidity of her soul. And after having nibbled playfully for such a length of time at the bait of love, she began now to feel herself struck, and abandoned herself to following the hook, so that it might not hurt her.

"Let us profit by a warning," said Des Frasses. "There are so many people passing who might surprise us here or elsewhere in public and make mischief."

"Oh, I know it well!"

"While at my house——"

"I know——"

"And then, not to be forced to strangle one's self by withholding half one's words—not to have to submit to the spying of a parcel of ill-disposed imbeciles. Just look over there: if the girls of this establishment even are not chattering about us, because, probably, our conversation is prolonging itself beyond what is ordinary!"

"I know very well."

"Then you will come?"

"Who will guarantee that you will not make me repent having done so? Show me how you will—yes—tell me all that you will say, that I may judge if I ought, if I may."

"I will say, my Clotilde, I love you, I love you, I love you!"

"It would really give you so much, so much pleasure?"

"Come to-morrow."

"Oh, no!"

"Ah! I am very simple to wish to persuade myself that you will ever love me! You don't even care for my love—you amuse yourself with it, that's all!"

"You are naughty. You pain me greatly—a wicked, wicked pain."

"Come to-morrow!"

"No! no! Wait an instant. I will, on Thursday or Friday."

"Thursday—Thursday! You promise me?"

"Yes, at four o'clock. But swear to me that my honor will be as safe as at my own house! You will behave as if you were afraid I should call out; in a word, as a gentleman. Good!"

"M. DIEUDONNÉ DES FRASSES,

"16 (bis) Rue Las Cases, Paris.

"MY BEST FRIEND:

"I am, I swear to you, too indisposed to pay you the little visit I had promised. It will be for another time. I am distressed about it. I the more regret this delay because I was very curious to see your abode; it must be very original. You are, with my compliments, of a temperament so

different to others, my dear friend, that you cannot care for anything commonplace nor for what others have. Of course, you can well imagine that I have never visited any bachelor apartments before.

"I am, alas! quite sure that you will be somewhat angry with me. But is it my fault if I am not in a fit state to show myself to any one for some days to come, so ugly do I look through indisposition? I am writing to you on the corner of my toilet-table, and I have a bad headache. I must hurry. *Some one* is in the next room, and *some one* might come in at any moment to learn how I am. That is why this is such a scribble, but don't mind it. For that matter, you must burn my letter—will you not?—as soon as read. I know that this request is superfluous; but if I beg of you once more to burn these lines (not to tear them up), it is because I have, in your favor, swerved from my firm resolution not to compromise myself by writing.

"I dare not enter into further details as to my regret in keeping you waiting for me uselessly, although there is enough on this sheet of paper to ruin me. The whole world is so bad. But can you not guess what my thoughts are? I want to know, as soon as possible, if you will not be too cross with me. I am certainly more annoyed than you at being used up to such an extent as to be unable to keep my appointment, you may be sure. I do not wish you to come and see me, out of prudence for the future. *Some one* is so strange just

now, not against you, but in general. Perhaps, after all, it is I who have become a little strange and no longer know how to judge people.

"Send me an answer '*poste restante*, Place Victor Hugo,' under the initials C. E. M. Y., which are the first and last letters of my names. I think this is the best way for corresponding secretly. Don't sign. You must tell me that you are not altered, not altered at all, and that you have sincerely pitied your poor invalid. You may even write me all the good inspirations which may come into your head, as nothing can disclose who you are or what I am.

"Your affectionate friend and great sufferer,

"CLO.

"Thursday, half-past one.

"P. S.—The truth is, I am not suffering at all. Yesterday I was quite decided not to disappoint you; still, since this morning, I don't know how, but somehow I have lost all courage.

"Of what am I afraid? Not of my husband, nor of you; for I look upon you as my best friend, in whom I have every confidence. Then of what? Scold me. Prove to me that I am wrong, that I am stupid; it will do me good.

"I hope *some one* will soon go down-stairs, and go wherever it pleases him. As soon as he is gone I shall tumble out to find a *commissinaire*. I shall tell him to make haste, so that you may get my note in time and not lose your whole day in



waiting for me. I know of nothing more grotesque than to keep people waiting. I hope that you have not given up anything important for such a misfire of a rendezvous. I should be the more vexed with myself. Perhaps it is the presence of *some one* which makes a coward of me. As soon as he is gone, perhaps I shall recover my energy. In that case this letter would be quickly destroyed by me, and it would be myself in person instead of it that you would presently receive. But I notify you of this hope without much expectation of its being realized, if for nothing else than to prove to you my good-will.

"I have also thought over the C. E. M. Y. letters; they form a word, and (it is just possible) it is quite feasible that there may be a lady named Cemy who may have her letters addressed *poste restante* in my district.

"To avoid all confusion, I beg you to address Y. E. M. C., which will be more reasonable.

"I also call to mind that I know an old dowager who lives at the corner of the Place Victor Hugo, who is constantly at her window watching the omnibuses pass. If it is all the same to you, I should prefer to have to do with l'Avenue Marceau Post-office.

"Write me in time that your letter may reach there to-morrow. In this way I shall be sure of finding it the day after to-morrow, Saturday morning. I shall constrain myself until then, although I am very anxious to hear from you; but only

think how pitiful I should look if, in consequence of some delay in the delivery, I should have had my journey for nothing. There is already—is there not?—too much of a scrawl, like this of to-day, between us.

“Write me a good long letter, S. V. P., with everything in it which you think will please me.

“Wishing to save you the trouble of burning my *pattes de mouche*, I pray you will send them back to the initials and office I have mentioned above.”

“Thursday, half-past three.

“MADAME YEMC,

“Poste Restante, Avenue Marceau P. O.

“A moment ago your letter came which tells me you will not come, that I must believe you will not come; yet I cannot resolve to doubt no longer, and to know that it will be so. The blessed hour which was to be, and for which I counted every second as it came nearer to me, the supreme hour for which I had to wait for you, like so many others, which, however, in no wise resembled it—that hour is still-born, evaporated beforehand. It seems to me that I shall never hear a sound of its life, that I shall never see it exist, and all these flowers which surround me, which I kissed in thanking them that they had blossomed so beautiful for you—now I could bite them, I would crush them under foot if I had the strength. But what’s the use? Did they not seem already on the point of attaining, of themselves, their beauty and per-

fume in that corner of my room, until then so sad-looking, from henceforth so funereal, which they had known how to transform into a virginal asylum, and which forever will remain closed like the tomb of the brightest of my dreams, like the sanctuary of the lost bride?

"Enclosed you will find your letter which you thought proper to ask me to return. I should have had, alas! no desire whatever to preserve it. It ought to have been framed in black, so much, much mourning has it occasioned. I enclose it now in its envelope, for my eyes will not, cannot look upon it again. . .

"I forgive you all the grief you have caused me, and for which you have no need to excuse yourself at such length. You should simply have written, 'My friend, I only love you for fun.' That would have been just as plain, not more cruel, and more frank. I should not have complained more. In the first place, observe that I am not complaining now. If my heart ever recovers from this terrible wrench, I even hope that it will almost be a consolation for it to say to itself that its first great deception came from you. Are you satisfied? And do you appreciate that I evince toward you in my martyrdom enough generosity? If not, I repeat for the second time that your right not to love me is indisputable. But why did you allow me to dream the reverse? Why these false pretences?

"I kiss your hand respectfully and with great sorrow.  
D.

“ P. S.—In reading your letter over again, I see that you wish me to believe that it is for another day. What? Which other day? There is no other day. It was to be Thursday, *my* Thursday: there was for me no other day but Thursday in the world! How could you, in perfect liberty, with nothing to constrain you, throw carelessly into the soul of a man who loved you that little word Thursday—Thursday?

“ And you did not at once understand that from thenceforth Thursday would mean everything to that man in the future, then in the present, and at last in the past; that for him Thursday would be the *one* day, and that, like God, you had chosen the day that should be yours from out of the seven days of the week! You! it seems that you would just as soon have chosen Friday or Saturday, as far as it mattered to you. And I, wherever I might happen to be, whatever I might have to hear, one thought only, one only memory, one only hope, buzzed constantly in my ears: ‘Thursday! she is coming on Thursday!’ and Thursday sounded and seemed to me as sublime as the Sunday of the Resurrection announced to the Apostles. Ah! I weep, I weep! But do not pity me, madame, for they are bad tears, tears which fall for my foolishness. Good-by, my friend. I am the most wretched of beings.

“ One word more. Saturday morning you will have read these feeble expressions of the misery I am suffering. I implore nothing, I no longer hope

for anything. Notwithstanding, the whole of Saturday I shall not stir out of my retreat. I shall be at home, alone, quite alone, on the brink of madness. Then decide, yourself, whether it shall be sorrow or joy.

"He who loves you in spite of all and who will love you forever.

"Saturday, directly on coming home.

"M. DIEUDONNÉ DES FRASSES,

"16 (bis) Rue Las Cases, Paris.

"At last I have your answer, my good dear friend, and that not without trouble. I was obliged to wait nearly half an hour in front of the little window among a lot of maids and *valets-de-chambre* who were making goodness knows what money transactions, one after the other. I thought I recognized them all as having opened the door or passed salvers to me somewhere. I am likewise almost certain that that hideous little curly-headed fellow in the post-office purposely made me wait, and, what is more, he was only just civil, thinking rightly for once that I was not likely to make any complaints to the Director. Consequently all my nerves were set vibrating. You can well suppose that your letter was hardly conducive to soothing me.

"You are a big, silly child. Ought one thus to upset one's self for a mishap? How could I undertake to make another rendezvous if I have not the

freedom at the last moment to get away? It would in that case tend to make me really indisposed. I am only at rest when I have the assurance that I should not be obliged to do what I do not want to do, which does not prevent one wishing what one may wish; the contrary even, very possibly. But, at all events, let nothing be irresistibly regulated in advance. The whole of the previous day I felt remorse that you were perhaps irritated with me on account of what I had done to you the day before. And *some one* had been so unsociable at breakfast all about a half-dress *soirée* where I wanted to go this evening that it made me still more furious against myself to have caused you pain. Is not what I say here very kind?

"Yes, my dear, it wanted less than nothing yesterday to lead me, on leaving the table, to come out and take you by surprise. I was only prevented by the fear of a hubbub, you not being prepared. Call me thoughtless; I allow the term. It was exactly the same thing that makes me miss an appointment with my dentist; and then suddenly one fine morning I felt very courageous, I went, and, crack! out came my wisdom-tooth. This, without comparison, and only to show you that I am a woman of sudden resolutions. But my energy can never wait nor be ordered for an hour fixed.

"Therefore, resigning myself not to go to your house unexpectedly, I promise myself that I shall be there without fail on the newly fixed day, which

I expected you would have referred to in your letter. In my agitation I took a walk where I might perchance hear something of you. Ah, stuff! Madame H. has no other thought in her mind than the marriage of her daughter with our friend T. To listen to her, no one had ever seen a suitor pay such an amiable and assiduous court. She kept repeating how thoughtful Monsieur T. was; and I said to myself: 'It is impossible that she fancies that all this has happened'—the more so that I knew that Monsieur T. personally was not at all smitten. But I tried in vain to persuade myself that Madame H. wanted me to believe it in order to exonerate herself from having so quickly talked her daughter into accepting a gentleman. I could not, in spite of myself, get rid of the impression that the little cunning Mademoiselle A. H. was very pleased to have, from morning to night, the attentive society of the man who would soon obtain her hand. It is probably very small-minded on my part, but, my dear, I was sad, very sad, depressed in myself. I could not help comparing the fate of this young girl to mine, while they are both still to be decided. Am I not as good as she? Yet for her before her marriage—and this one may well be put down as a patched-up one—six weeks of assiduities and preparations of all kinds will yet have to be gone through. During six weeks—and, for that matter, it has been going on for some time all the same—she will be escorted by Monsieur T., petted, excused in her thousand

and one caprices, advised and encouraged by the good words of him or her, looked at ceaselessly with a look that will encourage her to say at length, 'yes.' But I, whose lonely heart must hide itself from every one, I, whose life passes away altogether separated from you—it is by minutes, by very short minutes, that I must reckon how much time you have consecrated to win me. And you are indignant because I am fearful, because I draw back on the threshold of your door, beyond which I do not even know whether you will look upon me as your friend, or already, at once, as your wife. For heaven's sake, my dear, let me come to myself a little, know exactly how I stand with regard to myself. Take advantage also of the delay that I claim, to ask yourself for the last time if it is a serious and not a frivolous act that you are about to commit. I pray of you to give to my sensitiveness, to all my emotions, which you ought well to understand, to my weaknesses if you will—give me this respite of six weeks, which this future husband of our acquaintance (who is so inferior morally to you) would nevertheless be ashamed to bargain about, and could not, without being a wretch, willingly anticipate. You are a man too delicately constituted to be surprised that I compare my position to that of an innocent girl. Thank you, by the bye, for having called 'virginal asylum' the room which you had been good enough to make so beautiful to receive me in. Indeed, since I have thought of you I find within me but



youthful timidity and the sudden need of having some one to confide in. I am too stupid, with constant inclinations either to cry always or to laugh always.

"Write to me every morning, but to the Friedland Avenue Post-office till further notice. I shall answer without fail. And besides, you could easily come to the house to pay me two or three visits. Be kind and I will love you altogether. I do love you. Make love to me gently. CLO.

*"Burn this letter!"*

As she deftly folded this note with the nacreous blade of her paper-cutter, she felt a strange blending of relief and pride at having thus skilfully dis-embarrassed herself of the dangerous fascinations of her adorer, and her bosom swelled and her soft cheek flushed at the thoughts of this triumph of conventional virtue.





## VIII.

THAT evening, in the silent avenue of the Square Beausejour, which was still deserted at half-past nine, a carpet of snow led to the mansion of Madame Hobbinson, where the blaze of a *soirée dansante*, contrasting with the livid gloom of the interior, cast from the windows gleams of a furnace, and tones of flaming fire. It was, in fact, in order to have the greatest number of people possible at this *fête* that the celebration of the marriage, now imminent, had been postponed until the middle of December, under the pretext of the tedious formalities which Agnes had to endure during her conversion to the Roman Catholic religion.

On the first floor, the solitude of which would soon be peopled, the young girl and her mother inspected the order of preparations; in the ante-room, in the little reception-room which communicated with the supper-room, where the sideboard was already prepared, and in the dressing-room, along which tall palm-trees concealed the imprint of dismounted coats-of-arms. Each repeatedly assured themselves, here and there, that the servants had carefully dusted some surface or trimmed some lamp, and in various parts of the rooms they took

the temperature to see if it was necessary to open or shut off the heaters.

Then the two women, looking round to see if there was nothing left to be done, stopped at length face to face, when a momentary repose permitted them to experience a feeling of fatigue, and standing thus on the slippery polished floor in middle of the gilded circle formed by some chairs, while the last candles were being lit around them, they began gravely to button their gloves, which reached almost to their shoulders.

"Decidedly," remarked Madame Hobbinson, "your dress fits you better than mine. Here especially—from there, and perhaps from here——"

"What can that matter to you? You are so much prettier than I."

From a refinement of coquetry the mother wore a black tulle toilette identical with that of her daughter in white tulle. Each skirt was garlanded with a spray of roses; the body, looped on the right by a simple knot of ribbon matching the tulle, was held up on the left by a like epaulette of roses. And the stockings, both of black and white silk, displayed themselves embroidered with miniature moss-roses. No jewelry, no artifice of ornament in one or the other, ventured to obtrude itself sharply among the pale tints of their necks or their blond hair, nor, even in a slight degree, was kindly attention invited by what was visible of their figures. The same spring which brought them into flower seemed, through two symbolic

veils, to plunge its roots down into the invisible heart of their thoroughly divergent natures, and to glorify, by an equal expansion, the beauty of that which is black and the beauty of that which is white.

And yet how different had been the fertilizing showers and the ripening sunshine that had matured these two natures, mother and child, so alike yet so disparate. One had grown up in the golden sunlight of the West, where the declining orb of light and life scatters his last rays over a young and virginal world ; she had found beauty in its dry atmosphere ; she had become *spirituelle* in its Puritan environment ; she had become a flirt in the sandy desert of its hypocritical respectability. The other, fair and frail blossom of the Occident, developing under Eastern luminaries, yet pure as the untrodden prairies of the West, child of the simple life of clerical rusticity, now becoming woman in the heated, humid forcing-house of Parisian plutocracy and *rastiquarre* aristocracy, had all her illusions of conjugal life still floating, in dazzling uncertainty, before her ; proud of acquiring such a new position in the social world of the Balbenthals and high finance, unconscious of the love that was really filling her virginal heart, a love that the mother, before the evil days of her search after social triumphs amid the *bourgeois* splendors of the decadence of to-day, would have bid her cherish, would have bid her hold firm and steadfast against the corruptions of conventionalism.

The remembrances of her own girlhood, free in every action, untrammelled in every movement, pure in every thought, rose before Madame Hobbinson as she gazed, her limpid eyes suffused with moisture which a word of nature from her child would have made turn into pearly tears of maternal sympathy, on the fresh, fair, innocent reproduction of herself, whom she was dooming, a helpless victim, to the arms of a libertine, coarse in every deed and word, and tossing, without oar or rudder, a frail bark on the tempestuous sea of modern life.

"Tell me again for the last time that this marriage is not displeasing to you, that you are pleased with it!" began Madame Hobbinson, secretly looking at her daughter while buttoning her gloves with frantic efforts which made her shiver from the corner of her mouth to the tips of her toes. "See here," she said, in holding out her arm, "fix this for me; these buttons provoke me!"

Agnes, her forehead bent over her task, replied that she was perfectly satisfied, in a natural tone of voice, which, however, did not appear sufficiently affirmative to one who had the least suspicion of a doubt in asking the question.

"What a way of answering!" protested the mother. "That is not it. You must tell me if you are really pleased."

"I am quite pleased. Indeed, I assure you."

"No, you are not as pleased as I wish you should be. I want to see you thoroughly satisfied, thoroughly."

Madame Hobbinson felt that supreme desire of the will which obedience does not satisfy by mere passive consent, and which demands that the latter should take an active form, showing and expressing real pleasure.

For that matter, after having cleverly prepared and explained to her daughter their social position, she had expressed her great desire to unite her to Trept. She had encountered a more feeble resistance than she apprehended. It was on Agnes' part rather a willing child-like surprise, the pleasure of a young girl who protests, yet is flattered at having been seriously picked out and sought after.

As to the practical side of this impending marriage, by an instinctive drift toward social developments, by the law of individual advancement, she had come under the magnetic influence of adhesion to facts, which, as much as the spirit of opposition to ideas, is the most irrational of human motives.

Certainly her preference for Roland de Prébois, far from being abolished, surrounded her like a cherished mirage of the past, the present, and the future, while reality in all its strength had intervened between the unreal of her day-dreams. In the small theatre of her soul, Agnes precious guarded all the romanticism which is lived through and dreamed of amid so much stage effect and charming scenery; but somehow the curtain had dropped on the first act, and the young girl had experienced an expansion of her imagination and

almost a happy feeling at being about to take part in actual life; just in the same way as on those evenings when she went to the theatre she suddenly tasted, during the *entr'actes*, the pleasure of feeling that she was among the audience with the joy of living and of knowing that the crowd saw her living.

"You understand," continued Madame Hobbinson, "that if you thought you would not be happy with Trept I should never forgive myself for having allowed you to marry him. Besides, it is not yet too late. Will you be happy? Are you happy?"

"Oh," said Agnes, in that matter-of-fact way which makes all young people look absurd, but which, if said in the same words and with the same raising of the head, becomes at once tragic in people of experience, "I must surely have been created to be unhappy."

"Come now, my darling, what would you have to make you happy?"

"Oh, nothing! nothing! I assure you—I don't know!"

The girl showed, as she looked pensive and uninterested from the extreme corners of her eyelids, that in fact she did not know.

"For instance, I should have been greatly annoyed if Roland had obstinately refused to come this evening."

She had never intimated to her mother, either as a hope or a regret, any interest she might feel in

young De Prébois, and after having said this she retired quickly so as not to have the subject referred to any more.

As Madame de Prébois had previously foreseen that her son, whom she would not allow to have a dress-coat this year, would refuse to go in any other, Agnes had immediately written a letter of invitation to her friend, a long, pressing, and warm appeal, in which she reminded him of their mutual souvenirs and their innocent intimacy, using as an argument against Roland's defection everything that would have precisely justified his defection.

Upon receipt of this, after some delay, the latter had replied ceremoniously (and to Madame Hobbinson) that his father being away he would escort his mother to the evening party.

"No, admiral, you are spoiling me," said Agnes, in the reception-room, in thanking Monsieur de Kerguel for a pearl necklace which he had sent her a few hours before.

"It is a princely gift," put in Trept. "I was here when it came; it is magnificent. But why has Mademoiselle Agnes not put it on?" he added in turning toward his future mother-in-law, who had come on the scene at the sound of voices.

"Oh! nature has undertaken the task of adorning this charming girl," the admiral hastened to declare, guessing rightly that the omission which appeared to astonish the *fiancé* was due to Madame Hobbinson's tact, as she likewise was not wearing her new diamond aigrette. And, in fact, he was



desirous that as few people as possible should be called upon to go into ecstasies over the wedding presents, especially while he was there, and to try to find out and compliment the donor. It was, moreover, his habit, when at the American's house, to give presents, which in the first place were never exhibited, presents which hid themselves when they were new and, so to speak, young in the house, like a still wild troupe of domestic animals, which require some time for taming before they show themselves to strangers or permit themselves to be touched.

At this moment the door opened and Madame Maisnil and her brother were announced, followed shortly afterward by Monsieur and Madame Buzicourt with their two daughters.

"It is in honor of you that these young ladies make their *début* in society," exclaimed, simultaneously, the parents of the latter, who, red-complexioned and of short stature, kissed Agnes at the same time on each cheek, their kisses and smiles being rather awkward.

"How late people come now!" observed Madame Hobbison, as an excuse for the deserted appearance of her rooms.

Then as a matter of precaution, in spite of the number of promises which she had received, but which her experience told could not be relied on, she added: "Certainly, at the present day I cannot count on a quarter of the friends that I wished to see. I wanted, come what may, that this little

dear should have at least a hop. Besides, I have so little room here." She punctuated with a little laugh the modesty of her language, in which she never failed to include everything that concerned herself.

"You have more and more the air of being the sister of your daughter, madame," hazarded Madame Maisnil's brother.

He was a thin and pale-looking bachelor, with silky mustache, whose manner never varied in essaying a conquest of women, chosen systematically among those who are flattered to hear that they do not appear their age; in the first place, a glance which needs only to be met boldly in return to flee, and which immediately comes back, as if accidentally too soon; then talk of one's painful timidity and of one's precarious state of health, with a languor which ends by lulling the person selected into a dream that a love, thus offered, would be something ideally chaste or at least vaguely barren.

"Then you will not think me ridiculous if I dance by and by? You will invite me, will you not?" Madame Hobbison had replied, with a provokingly coquettish look, this flirtation being one of those that the admiral tolerated without any appearance of evil disturbing the peaceful severity of his white eyebrows.

Fresh arrivals now required Madame Hobbison's attention, old gentlemen connected with the Exchange, rather ugly, and forming in some sort a family for Trept, who introduced them. The

latter was, for that matter, big enough to marry himself. He had, therefore, induced his real parents to send him their benedictions by post, and on no account to leave Grenoble in this horrid winter-time.

Trept very wisely came to the conclusion that Paris was not China, and that, in acquiring a position as a man of the world, he had not conferred the same nobility on his relatives. Now come the three musicians who constitute the orchestra, then more guests; fat ladies already perspiring and, from their very entrance, fanning themselves; groups of young ladies whose skin, reddened by the outside cold, is shivering above the corset and on their frozen arms.

Then a gentleman who looks like a widowed doctor or an almost blind lawyer, who is pulling his daughter by the elbow of her sleeve to present her to Madame Hobbinson. She is dressed in pale blue silk, good-looking assuredly, perhaps a trifle too stout, apparently of age, the head of the school which Agnes had visited the day before for the last time.

And now comes a fresh rush of young people of both sexes, all hailing from one house in Rue Galilée. No chaperon governs them, and only rose, sea-green, straw-colored dresses divide into family groups the Misses Day, of Philadelphia, the sisters, Copiapo and Arequipa, who are with their brothers or friends of their brothers.

During the disagreeable moments of waiting

until the festivities begin Agnes conducted the little Balbenthals and Buzicourts into the large salon. The transatlantic contingent had already taken possession, trying the floor by sliding up and down or chattering and calling from the four corners of the room like a cage full of parrots.

Madame Hobbinson, with eye and ear constantly directed toward the door, but with her mind still further off—without, at the gate opening portières,—came, notwithstanding, with a uniform smile on her face, first to these, then to those who had gathered together apart or had for the moment sat down in a circle. Most of the guests, more familiar with each other than with their hostess, abandoned themselves to the pleasure of greeting each other, of making things pleasant without the bother of having to receive.

It was thus, for instance, that Baroness Balbenthal (whom the baron charged to impress upon Madame Hobbinson that he would do his utmost to come and escort his wife home) made room at her side for Madame Kerzenschein, took possession of Madame Amramsohn, who had not yet even wished the real hostess good-day, called Viscount Bourgeois to her, offered her seat to the viscountess, and enjoyed, with all the ease of being at home, the fun of being able, without one scruple of hospitality or of self-pride, to criticise the newcomers, with that remarkable hostility which characterizes the most polite people, by whom all, whose names or faces are totally unknown, are con-

sequently set down in their estimation as a species of barbarian properly so called.

Now and then curiosity is evinced to know who such and such an old lady may be, who, with head-dress and necklace of emeralds, brings no one with her who can dance, and whose entrance on the arm of an old gentleman having a star on the lapel of his coat and a many-colored ribbon over his shoulder produces a considerable sensation. Evidently they had only been invited to serve, in their turn, as decorative and honorable signs and emblems of vanity for the wall against which they sat apart, apparently without acquaintances of any kind. Trept was hailed, who hastened with all speed, the more so as he did not know what they wanted to know, but seeing that this, although it satisfied some, did not satisfy others, went for information to Madame Hobbinson. The latter was just then very busy in shaking hands with Madame Jonzac, to obtain whom she had been greatly urgent—the more so that she had been urgent with everybody—and thus the composer had, as an exception, to bring her with him.

“Ah, so that is Madame Jonzac? Well, after all she is not so bad-looking, although she squints!”

In confidences such as these in an undertone, the women expressed their astonishment that the husband did not take out oftener one of their sex whose face was so wanting in sympathy and who would always be less sought after than themselves and less well dressed. They even protested, with

the facility one has, without putting one's self out, and while thinking of something else, for righting the wrongs of others, and so much the worse if it is disagreeable! For a very little, every one would have said to Jonzac, with an electric current of polite generosity, confidentially and charitably:

"Do you know, your wife never goes out? It is not because she squints?"

"Well, what is it now? Well, the gentleman with the lady of the emeralds is the Chevalier Ligri, a former diplomat, it appears; at all events, he is the proprietor of that fine rose-colored mansion at the Trocadero."

"With those bronze sphinxes?"

"No, marble."

"Well, on the right?"

"As you please."

Now the opening waltz is heard. The greater number betake themselves to the drawing-room, but make way for a poor, tall young girl, who, her face covered with pimples, rises modestly on tip-toe in her endeavor to see Madame Hobbinson. She was attended by a young man, very, very stiff, whose starched shirt-front was held together by a large gold owl's head, and who, with firmly-closed lips, shoulders somewhat rounded, seemed to revolt against the disgrace of having to exhibit, like a showman, such an acidity of blood on the part of his sister.

In an angle under a chandelier, Madame de Prébois had drawn Des Frasses and was speaking

with volubility. She brought forth her exclamations and her laughs under cover of the noise of violins and the friction of feet on the floor, or the loud calls of young bosoms who were giving themselves up to enjoyment with open hearts. Since the serious affair of which she had assumed the management was definitively arranged to her maternal satisfaction, she found herself once more led, by her taste for patronizing, toward illicit intrigues ; she recommenced giving herself up, body and soul, to the love of love. According to the classical method which corrects its sulky children, pretending to ignore how Roland, a few chairs from there, remained motionless and taciturn in spite of the dress coat that had been given him, Madame de Prébois sounded Des Frasses with good-humor.

“ How comes it that Madame Mésigny has not yet arrived? She must soon be here, must she not? Is it long since you saw her? ”

“ Well, yes, it is some time since. ”

“ You find her very pretty, I believe. Have you not a little weakness for her? ”

It was for at least the twentieth time that Madame de Prébois had put this question to the young man, without perhaps perceiving nor attaching to it any more special importance one day than the other. But at this new start he thought he saw an intention quite particular, and discreetly replied, as if the formula excluded the idea of anything which stirred his passions :

"I find her very intelligent."

"Tell me a little—it will amuse me. You are paying court to her very much, eh? Just to amuse me! Oh, I have good right to a little bit of confidence. I have always been, I think, sufficiently attentive to you both!"

Des Frasses was embarrassed, fearing that his game had in some part been discovered, although the flirtation between Clotilde and himself had not been carried on for some months past under the eye of his questioner. But this was quite superfluous care. For Madame de Prébois held as non-existent everything which took place outside of her ken, as if things did not go on in her absence, as if they remained at the point where she had left them, and could not follow any other line than the one she had arbitrarily traced for them.

"Indeed," she continued, "you gentlemen are often so singular. One could swear that in many circumstances you are obstinately bent on not being willing—or rather—in fact, in certain cases you have ways——"

She stopped with a little touch of scruple. Then, stimulated by her inclination and reassured by the patiently interrogative air of Des Frasses, she continued:

"It would be ungracious to appear to give you advice, more so as such subjects at my age ought not to preoccupy me. In a word, Madame Mésigny has, when looking at you, an eye which has not escaped me. Yes, from time to time at my house



—especially at my house, because sympathy seems to me more communicative there than elsewhere. Ah, you would like me to talk nonsense! And now understand, don't attribute to me any mean suppositions! I do not pretend to guess to what lengths it will lead you; to nothing, certainly, for I love the little woman very much; I think her good, honest, attached to her duties—you also I like very well. I should like to see every one contented."

Through her fingers Madame de Prébois fixed her eyes, like gimlets, upon those of her listener, to bore a passage for the sentiment which, by the caprice of the moment, she wished to lodge there; and he, listening, bowed with an air of reserved thankfulness, with that urbanity which, according to the definition of a wise man, consists in society in allowing one's self to be taught things which one knows by people who do not know them.

Many times already Agnes had restrained herself in her natural impulse to approach Roland, whose paleness and cross looks were increasing. Oh, the apparition in a human being of the harm which one has done and which suddenly reveals itself! To doubt suddenly whether the hand which, until then, had always been friendly, will not close at our approach, and if we must risk the chance of not being able to lay our own therein—not to be able to find what one has to say to a person to whom one has always had

.

something to say, without having had to look for anything! To bethink one's self all at once that an unknown and public result may arise from our spontaneous step, from the same friendly and simple act, which but lately came from us instinctively like that of talking, laughing, walking, sitting down, and breathing! There was enough here to agitate the little brain of Mademoiselle Hobbins.

Roland, whose eye aimed obstinately at the point of his polished shoes, hid under this aspect of occupation an immense distress of heart and lancinating pangs of soul. He was thinking seriously of killing himself—very seriously; he was deliberating on the means of killing himself. And that which almost fascinated him in this fatal dream, and which he discerned beyond it, as a consolation, was Agnes, heart-broken, in despair, powerless to change anything or to diminish the misfortune—an Agnes weeping, wringing her hands before a Roland stretched out, calm, cold, dead, thank God! and having a rigid look of answering: "It is well, it is well enough, mademoiselle."

Ah, young Prébois was on the road to make the experience of how strong the attachment to life must be to be able to resist perhaps the most powerful of all attractions, that by which one feels that in committing suicide one worries dreadfully somebody whom we think we have to complain of.

Finally, Agnes, with that bad faith which expresses itself without betrayal and hesitates in

questioning because one knows what to answer one's self, went toward the young man.

"You are there then?" she said. "I have not yet seen you. Why did you not come to say good-day?"

"I had not seen you either," he murmured as he rose.

"But why don't you dance?"

"I have too bad a headache. It must be the cold. Snow often produces that effect on me. I ought, as they proposed to me, to have gone to Egypt to pass the winter with my father. Oh, now I regret very much that I refused to go."

The fire of his feverish eyes dried up two tears before they appeared—two tears which rose to the brink of his eyelids. By a flight of imagination he saw himself yonder, far away, weeping without ceasing in the midst of sands, alone in the real desert, and yet better there than anywhere, less lost than here where he was in front of her.

"Listen," persisted Agnes softly: "you must force yourself a little."

She made a slight courtesy and said:

"Will you do me the honor, monsieur, of according me the next waltz?"

And while he remained dumb, she added with the pretty sadness of a constrained smile:

"So it is I who have to make the request; just as in those islands you pointed out to me in Brittany—do you remember, Roland?—where the young girls——"

He interrupted her by a look of suffering, a look which mirrored, through the oppressive atmosphere of this accursed ball, the radiant recollections of a morning passed, long past, in the pure breeze through which the angels of young idyls seemed to have floated.

But, already inspired by the vivacity of a rhythm of the music, Agnes had leaned with her left hand on Roland's shoulder, and he, without reflecting, as if it were the mechanical action of his muscles under this light weight, had encircled the waist of his habitual partner and had grasped in his fingers the down-hanging wrist.

They commenced to waltz slowly. He with chest bent outward but his forehead thrown backward ; she, under the living band which pressed her in the small of the back, bent her tender form so that she appeared to have the bosom of a woman. And her little scared manner, the look of being on the brink of an abyss, which she always had in waltzing, increased for the time in the timorous glances which her *vis-à-vis* persistently refused to notice.

On several occasions, the fan of pale tortoiseshell and white ostrich feathers which Agnes held upright near the face of her partner, and which was so large, so broad that it would have been ridiculously out of place in the hand of such a juvenile person, if she had not been on the eve of being able to answer that the giver of this fan was absolutely her husband—on several occasions, then, the feathers of this fan tickled Roland's ear, who

at length ended by throwing back his face on one side with a brusque movement of impatience.

"Goodness!" she murmured; "how different you are to what you used to be, formerly. Yes, you! you! I am always the same to you. I shall always be the same——"

"O Agnes! do you dare? Can I believe it?"

It was all that Roland could say in an awkward complaint, with a choking sob.

And suddenly, jostling with all his strength against the elbows which hemmed him in, breaking through the crowd of couples which were confining him to one spot, he dashed madly into the throng to hide his trouble; he bore away his companion with giddy fury, seized by the delirium of the waltz, his eyes drunk with changing colors, his ears maddened with the noisy music, his nostrils intoxicated by the aroma of bodies in motion and by the artificial perfumes which the whirling trains threw all around. All his nerves became unstrung, the whole mass of accumulated indignation, which had enabled him for some time to retain his self-possession, crumbling away, the young man bowed his head feebly, and his mouth, almost touching the ear of Agnes, uttered a sigh, a great sigh, which set trembling a little tuft of hair. He felt her nestling against him.

"My dear Roland," she begged, "you will come and see me often—will you? won't you?—when I shall be at home? I shall live, moreover, nearer to you than I do now. If you could come and make

me a nice little visit every day it would be delightful. Do you understand?"

And as well as she could, in her honest candor, in her virgin ignorance, she explained how he must not be sad, and that really she did not understand what was the matter with him, unless he wished to cause her grief, since nothing was changed in her toward him, never would change—never! never!

"You are dizzy," she said, seeing that her friend was ready to faint. "Shall we sit down?"

Just then Trept appeared, forcing his way, and, planting himself in front of them, in all the good-humor of his rather ample figure, exclaimed, under that double wrinkle of the upper lip, which, like a circumflex accent, dulls the smile of experienced mouths:

"Well, here you are, always kind!—a woman of your word. Here is a whole hour that I have been running after you. But come, shall it be this waltz? It is the one you promised me."

"Oh, that is true," said Agnes composedly.

"Will you agree to our ending it together?"

Without more ado she left Roland, leaning upon Trept, and without waiting to catch her breath she waltzed with gravity for some time, with a dignity truly conjugal. During the last bars of the piece, every time that the circulations of the dance brought her in proximity to the *other*, she addressed to him, behind the back of her future husband, beneath the bend of the encircling arm, a myriad of little how-do-you-do's, in which there was that

effusion which parity of their age created and in which is represented the characteristics of that ostracism by which those of preceding generations were excluded from family unions and from ingenuous intimacies.

Madame Nully-Lévrier already occupied one end of the short sofa on which Roland de Prébois had let himself fall. Her toilette was more than *galante*; to speak the truth, the liberty of a goddess reigned there. Above her red hair a diamond trident glittered; then almost nothing visible to adorn or clothe the bust, except a corset, which only occupied the space of a wide belt, matching the skirt of sapphire velvet.

"The example of your friend, does it not also give you an inclination to marry?" she asked, fixing on Roland her green eyes, whose pupils were but two little spots of changing light.

"Oh, no, madame, surely not! No!"

The tone of this protestation was so thrilling that Madame Nully-Lévrier was struck by it, and she had, as it were, an intuition of the sentiment which thus breathed itself forth. And the whole pillaging troop of her longings, of her vanities, of her coquetries, always on a *rassia* around this brazen woman, against the most modest treasures of all hearts at once took the alert. She leaned affectionately toward Roland, with the caressing palpitation of her bust on his breast and the warmth of her breath upon his neck.

"Ah, my dear child," she whispered behind her

fan; "tell me, then. Is there not a lot here of shoddy aristocrats?" And then, seeing the trouble of young De Prébois, who, disturbed by her touch and unexpectedly shaken in the full force of his young senses, pretended to hide his embarrassment by brushing the violet powder suddenly scattered on the lapel of his new dress-coat, Madame Nully-Lévrier perceived that her speech had been of a too advanced slang for the age of her listener. And vexed at not having close at hand a better partner to replace the youth, she turned toward her neighbor, Madame de Flercamps, with whom she kept up an acquaintance of rather a common style, in order to catch, here and there, some reflections of respectability. The latter, a little, thin, nervous woman, infatuated with her husband, for whose pleasure alone she went out to evening parties, maternally foolish over three children born in three years of married life, smoothed down her eternal puce-colored silk dress and contemplated the guests with a complacent, patient smile, with that air of knowing where happiness is to be found—that it is quite near, at her house, at a quarter of an hour's drive or half an hour's walk.

"This ball," observed Madame Nully-Lévrier to her, "is really too mixed in its composition. If I had known, I should have preferred not to have risked myself here."

"Oh, reflect, madame," answered indulgently the respectable lady, "it is always like this, the same people everywhere."



To speak more exactly, the salon of Madame Hobbinson furnished in this instance one of those neutral grounds where a momentary meeting takes place between the most respectable persons and people most ill-spoken of, in a festive harmony, in a conciliatory luxury of precious stones and silk stuffs, which, all proportions kept, constitute the scene and spirit of the Field of the Cloth of Gold.

Elbowing Monsieur Marchepont, President of the Chamber of the Court of Appeal, appeared Monsieur de Travières, a sportsman, who for some slight irregularity had but lately had his horses disqualified on all the race-courses. Madame de Prébois had just consented to allow old Prince Andras to be presented to her, who from all time was supposed to cheat at *écarté*, but whose reputation had somewhat ameliorated since his son, the duke, had seriously wounded in a duel a member of his club *à propos* of a joke on this subject.

There, too, might be seen a fine woman, in deep red faille with a large black butterfly with wings powdered with rubies in her hair. She had taken possession of Colonel Xaintrailles, and kept him there by the timid charm of her large fawn's eyes, which hid, nevertheless, in their depths the image of a fearful drama; for her husband, it was said, had committed suicide at her feet on her account.

The mere sight of this flirtation so exasperated Madame Nully-Lévrier that, stopping Madame Hobbinson, who was walking toward the buffet on

the arm of Monsieur de Flercamps, she said to her in friendly reproach :

"You live, then, in the stars, my good friend. Goodness! how came you to invite Madame Bayarès? At all events, my friend, I warn you——"

"Really? Ought not I to have done so?" replied the mistress of the house, with an air of fallacious uneasiness. "I didn't know that there was anything. It was simply to oblige Van Haffel, who is just now painting her portrait and who asked me to receive her. I thank you, for the future. You will tell me what they say about her outside of the affair of her husband, and at present of Van Haffel? No, I swear to you, I know of nothing more——"

Then turning about with vivacity, the American replied in low tones to some remarks—nonsense, doubtless—which Monsieur de Flercamps continued to pour into her ear :

"Will you be quiet? Would you begin again to embroil me with your wife?"

And once more turning where she stood and leaning over with confidential tenderness to Madame de Flercamps, in order to repair any breach in their relations, she stammered out very vivaciously, in her delight at the great attendance she had succeeded in obtaining for her reception :

"It's all very well at the start to limit and restrict one's self, but so many tormenting requests are made from all quarters and on all sides that one is obliged to have three times as many people invited

as would be desirable for general comfort. At least, dear friend, are you not too warm?" she concluded, with extreme interest, thus marking her preference by the especial way of asking the question, which might have been equally as right and as urgent if put to the hundred and fifty persons around them who were mopping themselves with their handkerchiefs, crushing each other in cadence, and drawing from each other's mouths, unconsciously, rarefied oxygen, in one of those little invisible dramas where the Parisian world enjoys, for its amusement, the same agonies from which the whole world in its dying days will suffer.

At the buffet, between Des Frasses and her husband, Madame Mésigny, in mauve tulle, was sipping a cup of iced coffee in an appreciative way.

"At a ball, you know," said Albert, "my wife is no longer my wife. She becomes common property. One would take her to be, to a certain extent, the wife of the whole salon."

And, indeed, in that atmosphere, where the haste to please for the instant communicated an affability almost meretricious to the souls of women, Clotilde never ceased to offer the grasp of her hands, to the left or to the right of her two companions, in front, behind, above. A shake with Monsieur Bréal, a shake with Monsieur Cernex; a call here, a flying compliment there. But whatever care she might take in traversing this chaos, her flirtations with all, as well as her special flirtation, seemed, even to

herself, to be lost in the ambient mass of so many flirtations.

At one time Trept and Agnes Hobbinson, coming near the trio, were in such a state of perspiration that Des Frasses, with the utmost solicitude, resolutely opposed their drinking any iced water.

"No, I will prevent you, in spite of yourselves, from injuring yourselves. If you were to catch a good bronchitis—eh? A nice thing! When one is preparing to marry in five days one should, if necessary, die of thirst rather than encounter the risk of an adjournment of the ceremony."

"My word!" objected Trept, touched, however, by his affectionate zeal; "that is what I would call being more royalist than the king! If our friend would get married himself, he would not take so many precautions, perhaps!"

The smile of a teasing jest came to the lips of Madame Mésigny.

"Oh!" she said, "I suppose that Mademoiselle Hobbinson ought not to be in such a hurry to get to the end of her romance. Alas! poor little darling, look to my long experience. No, but you have not the least conception how your *fiancé* will modify the manners which have won you, the moment he is your master. All the bad sides of his character will then come to light. Ah! if women had only a little sense they would always remain engaged. For my part, I know well that if it were to be done over again——"

And in a modest attitude, pushing back with

the point of her finger the knot of a little string in the interstices of her corsage, Clotilde bent her face down to hide an inclination to laugh—the satisfied expression of a person who has a good joke on some one present.

“Is it possible, madame, is it possible?” Agnes repeated, absently, with a bending of the neck which she thought very ladylike.

Trept smiled with a polished and superior air, finding it useless to defend himself, while Des Frasses began to protest vigorously, as if it was incumbent upon him to plead the case and defend the fame of the male sex. •

“The iniquity of these theories, mademoiselle——”

But Albert Mésigny, who thought he had been selected personally as the butt by his wife, cut this speech short.

“Mademoiselle Agnes,” he said, with rather pedantic authority, “remember this axiom. It is always the fault of the woman if she is not beloved more and more, day by day, by the man to whom she has willingly given herself. To us men, our love, which commences, perhaps, by thoughts a little selfish, only blossoms really through gratitude. Ah! if you only knew how dear to us is the habit of a love we have well placed! what a longing we have of showing our gratitude! But for the most part of the time, it is as if it were by fatality, our wives choose, for some unexpected quarrel, the very moment when we felt for them,

or were about to express to them, the kindest thoughts. Then you can understand that eventually we learn not to have any such ideas. Beware of quarrels, mademoiselle. The best words between married people have, perhaps, not yet been spoken, since world is world ; every time, at the very moment they are rising to the lips, women have had the ingenuity to fling them back into the throat of their husbands."

During this time Des Frasses had been caressing his beard, and in his turn, with a cunning intention, by marks of approbation, he insinuated to Clotilde without opening his teeth : " Please listen, I beg of you. I am not suggesting these remarks to him." And she, warming to the game, was almost vexed that Albert had not sacrificed the reputation of his fellows to support the last prop of their household life.

" So be it," she began again. " I admit that the sweets of union may prolong themselves during the first few months. But after—n—o—no. It is all over with the languishing, attentive, and fascinating looks which have caught us, poor crazy ones that we are. We have killed the goose with the golden eggs. We must from henceforth resign ourselves to every concession if we do not wish to be called bothersome, if we do not wish to be left !"

" How is that ?" muttered Mésigny, displeased at the triviality of the word. " Until now I always thought that one was tied for life——"

"And divorce," added Clotilde, in blushing at the mistake which led to the misunderstanding.

Des Frasses intervened:

"As for me, I envy the lot of woman, inasmuch as she can, every minute of the day, assure herself that, by a look, she holds in her hands the happiness, the dream, the existence of another being. Her soul, when one tries to move it, envelops itself in a mystery which often is only a complicated form of indifference, or which resembles as much the pleasantry of disdain as the gayety of love. Man, on the contrary, is so simple, so demonstrative in his passion, so happy to show that he is happy, so frank in avowing that he suffers——"

"Ah, is anybody ever sure of anything?" said Clotilde.

She looked at Des Frasses with an expression which did not succeed in being sceptical.

One and the other delighted to gossip freely, just as if in the presence of deaf people or in a tongue known by themselves alone, with those covered phrases in the terms of which two lovers always think themselves concealed, and which at the same time usually amuse the disinterested persons of the audience, who see distinctly the furtive shadows of sentiment traversing the shadow of the dialogue.

And while the ball, that had now attained its densest throng, redoubled its elegant fury and its permitted liberty of voluntary pairing, Admiral de

Kerguel, erect, solid, with his ancestral figure, his head towering above the others, caught, as they passed, the looks which women throw on discovering the tolerated attentions of adventurous homage. Retaining in his old age experience and vigor, he wandered from room to room, rubbed by the trains of dresses, with dilating eyes and nostrils. The man who had seen naked negresses dance and the bronze limbs of bayaderes grow animated beneath their gauzy attire, thought, as he passed through this *fête* of the West:

"No! but is it not charming? Can one dream, I ask, anything more exquisite than this reunion? Ah, why am I so old? What aberration of soul can lead the young men of to-day to vulgar amusements when the best of company is here within their reach?"







## IX.

IN broad daylight, at noon, the solemnization of a Christian wedding is taking place.

Placed prominently in view on a raised platform, framed in by flaming candles, two beings were plighting their troth; a prelate, bowed down before the golden altar, prays heaven to bless the intention these show to practise together, from henceforth, the duties of married life.

The husband, in black coat, serious, with a brow which, purified by the religious service, retained no vestige of high living, seemed crowned with a mystic aureole that the rays of a winter sun cast through the large glass windows.

At his side the bride, pretty and modest, kneeling on a *prie-Dieu*, attracted every look by the transparent disguise of her nuptial dress. White-robed, with her long train of satin, and crowned with orange blossoms for the first time in her life, she exhibits the emblems of her virginity, in order that every one present might thoroughly understand the very object of the sacrifice.

A unanimous sigh of the most distinguished consideration pervaded the assembly invited to honor the supreme moments of the marriage, after which the hymeneal ceremony will have ceased to

be a matter of public rejoicing, a spectacle offered to public curiosity, according to the formalities of civilization.

Soon those few minutes have elapsed which so many mothers have thought they ought to take advantage of, by telling their daughters what marriage is. Presently, the most hardened matrons would themselves veil their faces before the consequences which sacerdotal intervention is now preparing and which it consecrates by the nobility of its slow and solemn gestures.

But here clear consciences, as well as learned minds, receive and venerate the preliminary sanctification of that which good breeding forbids us to mention, and which the laws prohibit us from painting or writing about.

Again all heads are bowed by the edifying solemnity of such a scene, while the flowers, around the altar, mingle their glow with the twinkle of the torches, and the odor of incense rises to join the sacred strains of music in the gallery of the nave.

Who could have suspected that in the midst of that imposing ceremony there were two other beings who, separated by the crowd as they were in life, detracted from the grandeur of the ceremony? Mysteriously betrothed, they kneel in that church, where the Almighty deigns to permit the union of flesh to flesh, in deep emotion, as if, in the infinite descent of the divine blessing, some particles might fall upon them.

Without doubt, they imagined to themselves that they were the indissoluble husband and wife of sin, exchanging their mutual consent in the silence of their secret, in the decency of their dissimulation, in the timidity of their sacrilege, in a superstition of a new and nameless love.

Whatever it might be, the power of knowing their dream and of awakening them out of it belongs only to the God of mercy, to whom human ways are perhaps only children's games, and who probably finds, in view of the buffoonery of our virtues and the scared timidity of our vices, something with which to enliven the eternal monotony of His providence.

And now, having satisfied all the exigencies of society and all the rites of the Church, the lawful wife, at the head of the procession, is leaning on the arm of her husband, who thus publicly begins to take possession. Not in the least troubled, with her eyes raised and lips smiling, she passes on through two rows of spectators, greeted by the respect of friendly looks and acclaimed by a glorious *finale* on the organ. The escort of beadles, braided and haughty beneath their halberds, marked with a stroke of their canes every step which brings this couple toward the destined end.

But the other married woman hides herself in the crowd. She keeps her long eyelashes lowered as she makes her quiet way across the square. She walks with such humility toward an end materially the same, and, without her suspecting it, her face

is suffused by a blush in which glitters such a redeeming grace that perhaps there may be room to ask if shame in concealed evil may not be equivalent to serenity in conventional good.

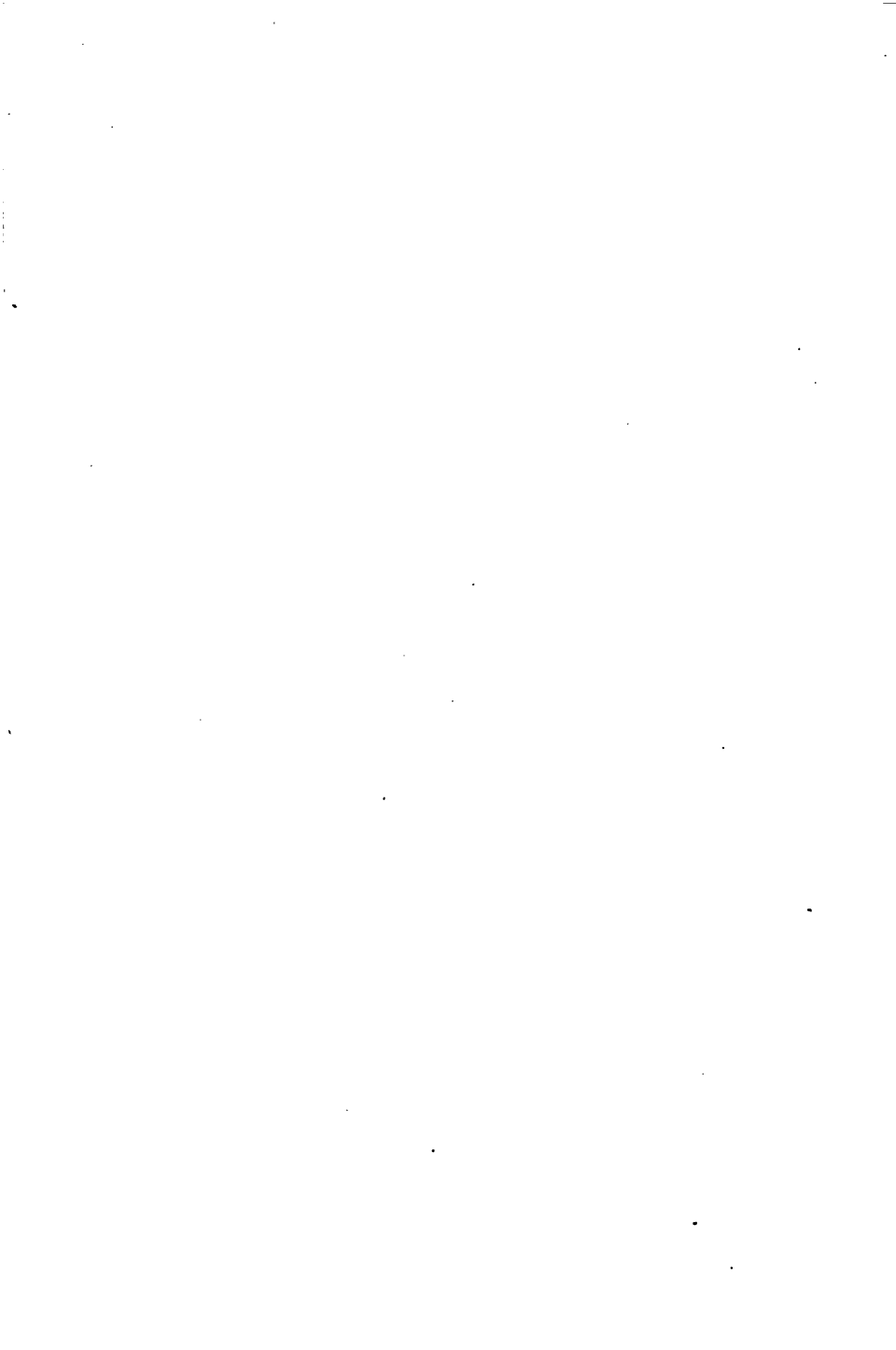
[The reader is referred to the illustrated quarto edition, published by Worthington Company, for all the full-page illustrations and head and tail pieces of the French edition, it being impossible to reproduce them in this small form.]



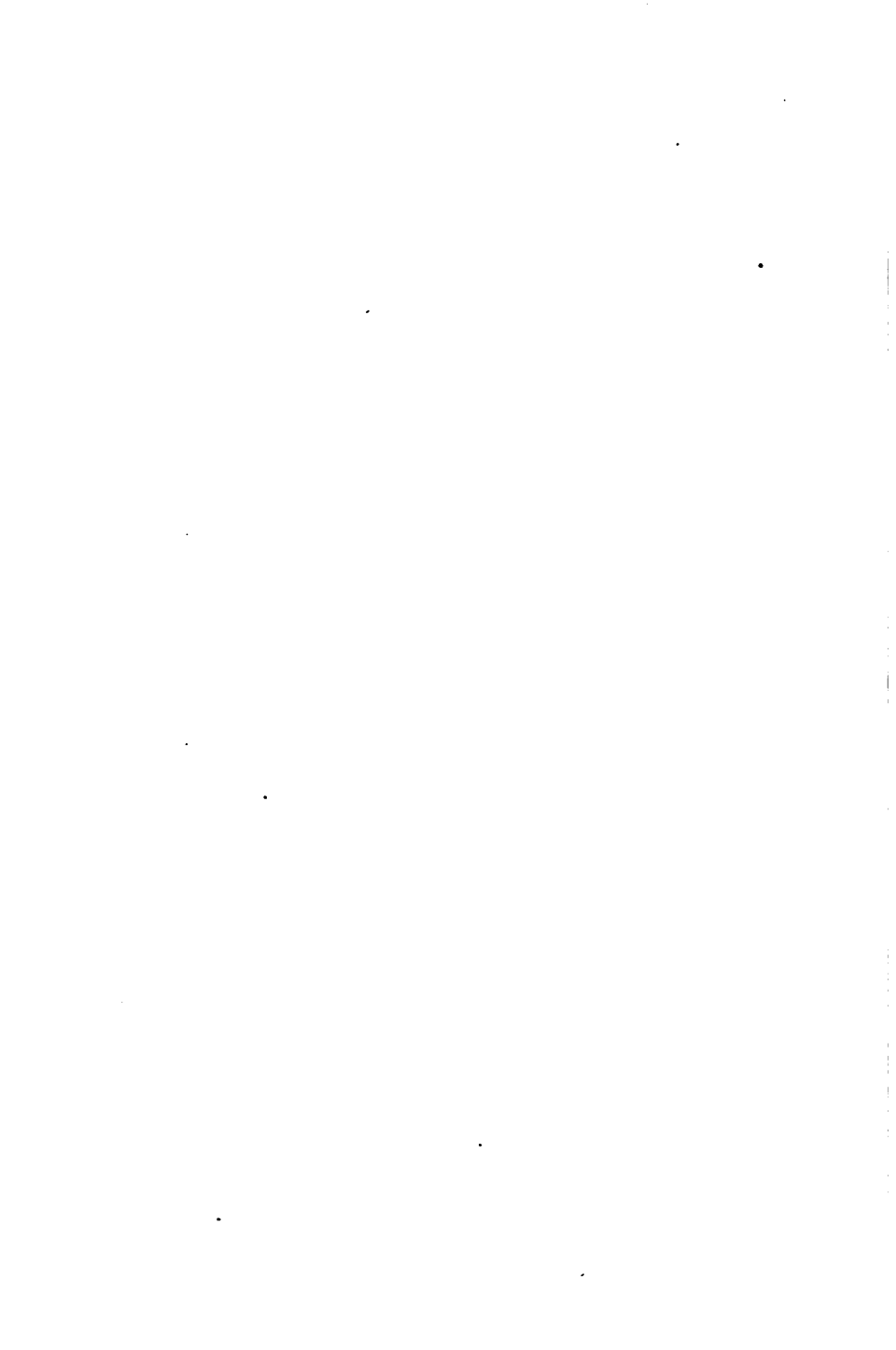


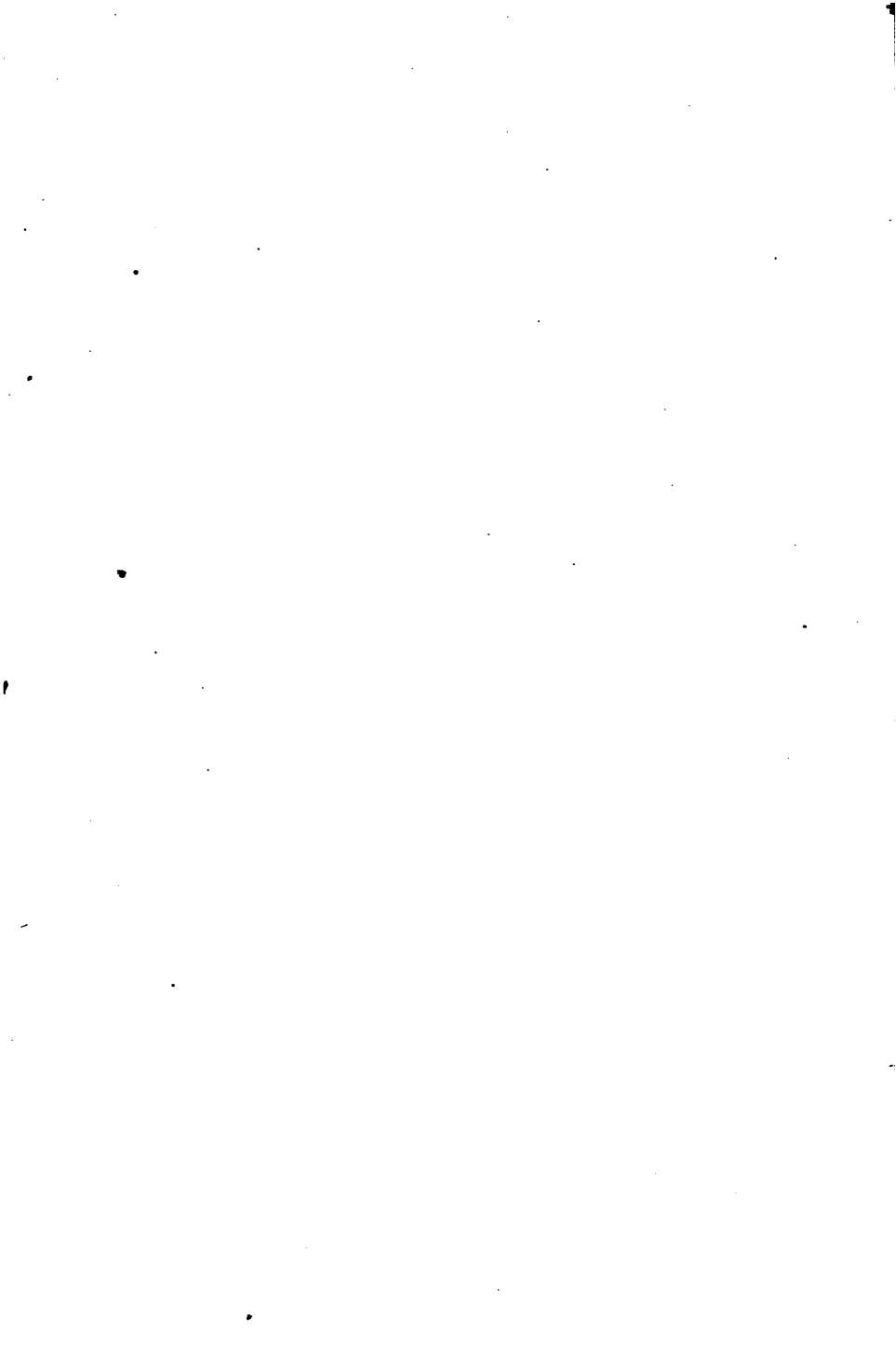


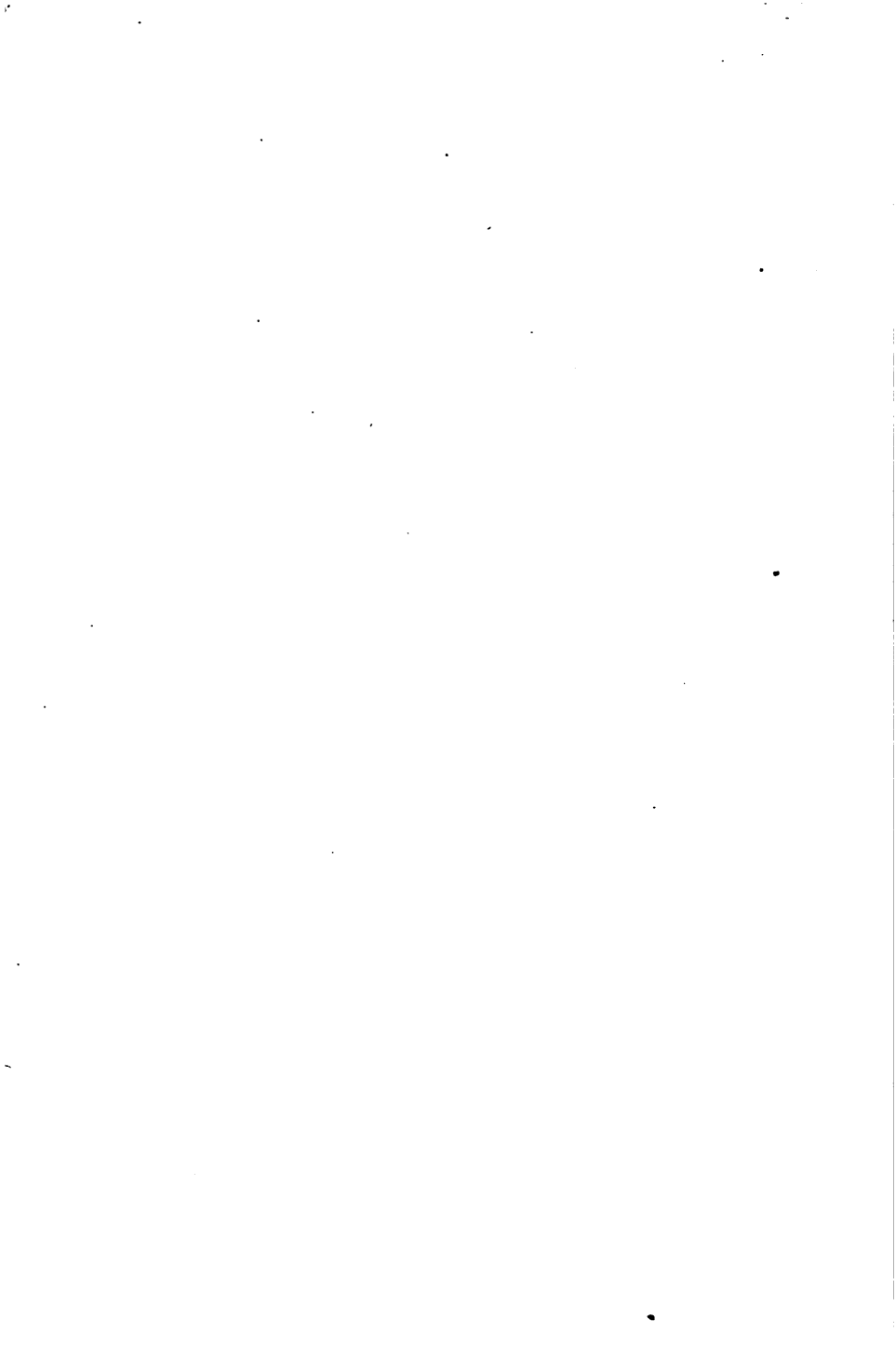




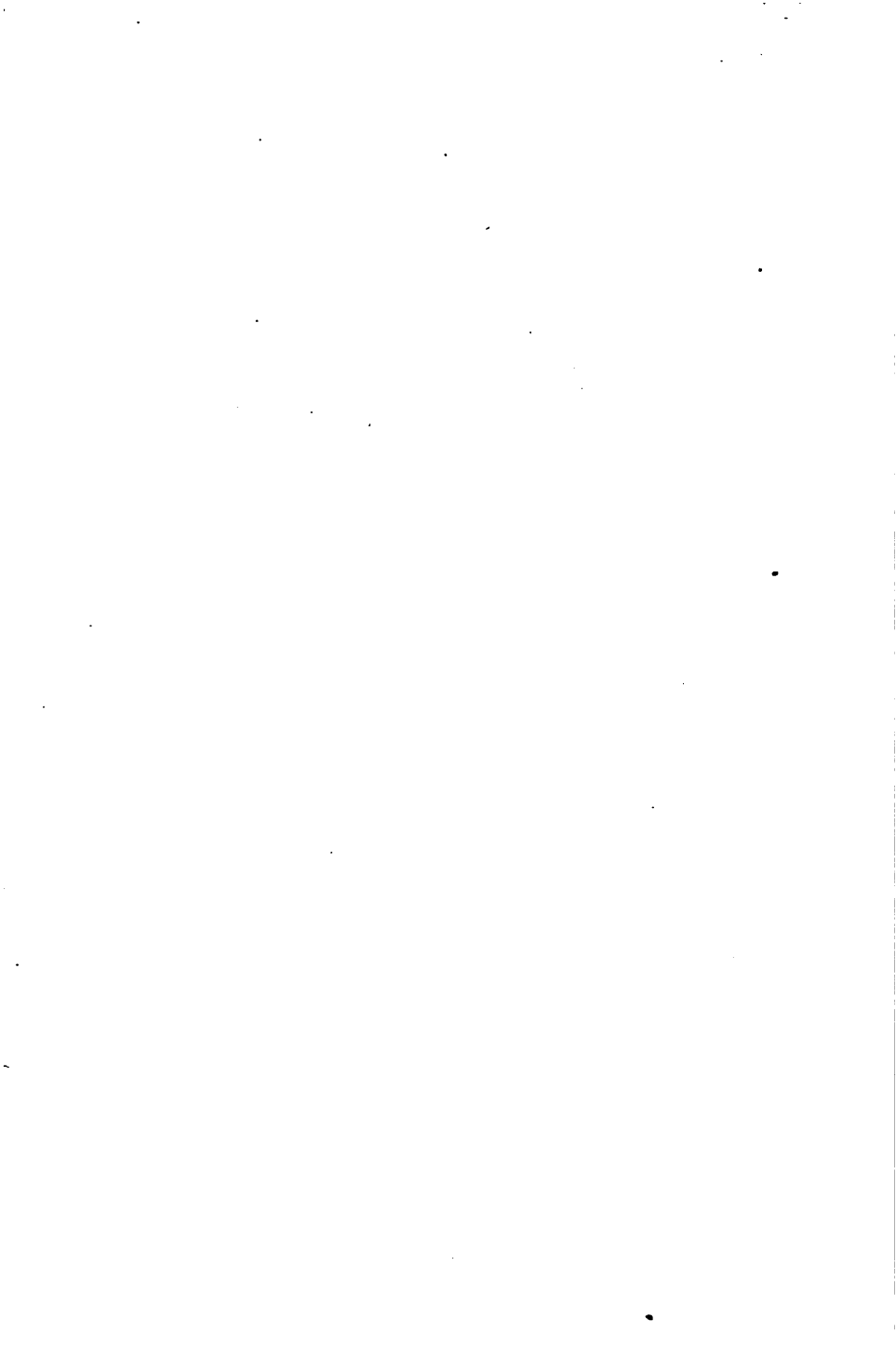




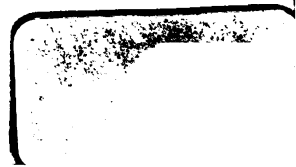




This book  
Library



This book  
Library





This book  
is  
in the  
library





